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Dedicated to Ursula Smith, Petros Ndlela and Johnathan Williams.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AIPPA – Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act

API – Application Programming Interface

CIO – Central Intelligence Organization

FPTP – First Past the Post

GALZ – Gays and Lesbians Association of Zimbabwe

IP – Internet Protocol

LGBTIQ – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Questioning

MDC – Movement for Democratic Change

MDC-A – Movement for Democratic Change-Alliance

MISA – Media Institute of Southern Africa

MOPA – Maintenance of Order and Peace Act

POSA – Public Order and Security Act

URL – Uniform Resource Locater

VMCZ – Voluntary Media Council of Zimbabwe

VPN – Virtual Private Network

ZACRAS – Zimbabwe Association of Community Radio Stations

ZANU-PF – Zimbabwe African Peoples Union-Patriotic Front

ZBC – Zimbabwe Broadcasting Cooperation

ZCTU – Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions

ZDF – Zimbabwe Defence Forces

ZEC – Zimbabwe Electoral Commission

ZESN – Zimbabwe Elections Support Network

ZNA – Zimbabwe National Army

ZNLWVA – Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans' Association

ZRP – Zimbabwe Republic Police

ZUJ – Zimbabwe Union of Journalists

ABSTRACT

A political system that facilitates and encourages sincere and careful listening among its citizens will produce more democratic decisions. Yet, good listening is being almost completely ignored in that form of political conversation we know as democracy. As such, this thesis argues that due to an abundance of 'digital citizens' owing to the proliferation of the internet and social media, a 'democratic listening' approach to political deliberation has become urgent. However, the application of digital citizenship and democratic listening theories have been minimal in Africa's democratic framework. Accordingly, this thesis seeks to develop this neglected body of scholarship by submitting a case study of Zimbabwe's 2018 harmonised elections.

In the African context, most countries principal criterion for democracy is the holding of elections and simply letting citizens' vote. Most of these African administrations also escape the demands of accountability and democratization by steadfastly manipulating legacy media – media originally distributed using a pre-internet medium i.e., print, radio and, television. With the advent of social media which has enabled citizens to access alternative sources of information, this aberrant principal criterion of democracy is now being challenged.

The thesis locates itself within digital methods that incorporate qualitative research methods. It makes use of the available digital objects such as the like, share, and retweet buttons to explore societal changes and cultural conditions by investigating online data. The data for analysis is gathered from the social media platforms, Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp Messenger. Twitonomy which was developed precisely for Twitter research and offers detailed and visualised analytics of tweets and hashtags is used for data gathering on Twitter. For Facebook, the now defunct Netvizz is used for textually mining data off the platform and on WhatsApp Messenger, an ethnographical approach is exercised.

The findings confirm that in Zimbabwe and Africa, social media have emerged as a space for mobilising resistance to authoritarianism and failed promises from elections. Although, African administrations exercise listening as a rhetorical exercise undertaken for instrumental reasons to boost their popularity when they are in a state of decline, social media are now a viable alternative public sphere that democratises political space.

PREFACE

In 2014, I began studying how Zimbabwean citizens were using Twitter for political dialogue. Back then, the use of Twitter for political deliberations by Zimbabwean netizens[1] was relatively new and unexplored scholarly territory. At the time, the regular focus for social media analysis among Zimbabwean scholars such as Moyo, D, 2009; Moyo, L, 2009, 2011; Mare, 2009; and Bugalo, 2013, was Facebook.

In 2017, my study (Ncube, 2017) highlighted that earlier in 2012 Masimba (2012) found that Zimbabwean youths had been increasingly creating Twitter profiles since early 2012. These Zimbabwean youths were now vibrantly using Twitter such that they fashioned the portmanteaus, Zwitter (a combination of Zimbabwe plus Twitter), and Twimbos (a combination of Twitter plus the nickname Zimbos). Nyaruwanga (2014) further argues that Zimbabwean youth had found a free and unrestricted space in Twitter, where they could join broader political, economic, and social conversations affecting them and the country.

In Zimbabwe, youth are defined as people between the ages of 15 and 35 according to the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No.20) Act 2013 Section 20. This is guided by the African Youth Charter[2] of which Zimbabwe is a signatory. Plecher (2019) advances that in 2010 the Zimbabwean median age was 18.6 years, in 2015 this dropped to 18.4 years, for 2020 it is projected to increase to 18.7 years. Thus, youths make up most of Zimbabwe's population, however they are often politically and economically marginalised in favour of the war veterans of the liberation struggle. In fact, Mutukura (2019) claims that the war veterans who are mostly in government positions of influence and power only use the youth for political mileage and expediency. This has contributed to the 'diminishing political participation of young people' (Vihma, 2016) in terms of voting and joining political parties inevitably leading to politics suffering a decline in popularity.

Additionally, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) argue that in modern democracies, younger citizens are increasingly moving away from political parties, broad reform movements and ideologies. However, others (Cammaerts et al, 2013; Hay, 2007; and Kiisel et al, 2015) argue that this decline could be at least partly attributed to

[1] "Netizen, in its broad usage, refers to individuals that use the Net (Internet) for whatever purpose. As a jargon, it is about the professional structuring and utilisation of the Net towards meritorious motives. Collectively, Netizen connotes a citizen of the internet" (Omotoyinbo, 2014: 54).

[2] "The African Youth Charter provides a strategic framework for youth empowerment and development activities at the continental, regional and national levels across Africa. It addresses key issues affecting youth, including employment, sustainable livelihoods, education, skills development, health, youth participation, national youth policy, peace and security, law enforcement, youth in the diaspora and youth with disabilities", (UNFPA ESARO, 2012:1)

the changing forms of political participation. Thus, the classical ways to measure participation do not capture the current trends which depict young people politically participating through alternative channels. Bakardjieva (2012) thus introduces the concept of 'sub-activism' which aims to illustrate the changing modes of political participation that encompass various everyday activities and the role of the Internet in such activities. Characteristic of sub-activism is that its locus is the private sphere or the small social world. Thus, Bakardjieva describes it as "small-scale, often individual decisions and actions that have either a political or ethical frame of reference (or both) and remain submerged in everyday life" (2010: 134). Therefore, sub-activism is constituted by numerous acts of positioning often in the imaginary vis-à-vis large-scale political, moral, and cultural confrontations, but also with respect to ongoing micro interactions and conversations. Bakardjieva (2010) also posits that sub-activisms' frames of reference are fluid and constantly shifting as they are influenced by the ongoing dialogue between the subject and the cultural discourses permeating his or her social environment. Vihma (2016) reasons that sub-activism significantly contributes to the institutional understanding of the 'political' as it scrutinises its meaning from a cultural perspective which assists us to see how everyday activities can be understood as a political repertoire. Bakardijeva states that "sub-activism in my definition is a kind of politics that unfolds at the level of subjective experience and is submerged in the flow of everyday life. It is constituted by small-scale, often individual decisions and actions that have either a political or ethical frame of reference (or both) and are difficult to capture using the traditional tools with which political participation is measured" (2012: 92). Therefore, sub-activism is not only limited to analysing online activism, but all online activities form a part of the larger sub-activism repertoire.

The present research theorizes that in Zimbabwe, increased online participation may increase offline participation in civil and political issues since it exposes citizens to a wider range of political views (Ikeda et al, 2013) thereby improving democracy. This same anticipation is also built on the premise of collective and connective action developed by Bennett and Segerberg (2012). "The familiar logic of collective action is associated with high levels of organizational resources and the formation of collective identities, and the logic of connective action is based on personalized content sharing across media networks" (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012: 739). Thus, the logic of collective action emphasizes the problems of getting individuals to contribute to collective endeavour. This typically involves seeking some sort of public good, for example, democratic reforms, that may be better attained through forging a common cause; and at the core of the logic of connective action is the recognition of digital media as an organizing agent.

The sub-activism of the Zimbabwean youth might also help in the understanding of the experiences of other African countries. These countries have relatively young populations who are online and experience political, economic, and social challenges. “Although Africa has a youth-dominated population, African government policies are often not youth-centred and African governments, and their international supporters are frequently under-informed about the priorities of most youth” (Sommers, 2011: 293). During the Arab Spring, LaGraffe (2012) argues that the ‘youth bulge’ in Egypt played a major role in the eventual fall of the Mubarak regime. Youth bulges are defined as “large cohorts between the ages of 15 and 24, expressed as a percentage of the total population” (LaGraffe, 2012: 67) or “an increase in the population of the youth relative to other age groups” (Omoju and Abraham, 2014: 352). The youth bulge is a demographic phenomenon strongly connected to security challenges hence LaGraffe (2012) asserts that the Arab Spring was influenced by the demographic composition of the Egyptian population. Youth bugles can result in job shortages and as the population growth exceeds economic growth, the problem becomes even more acute.

The present research uses the 2018 Harmonized Elections in Zimbabwe held on 30 July 2018 as a case study to explore the role of social media in democracy. Zimbabwe usually favours harmonized elections i.e., the election of president, parliamentarians, council members (local government) at the same time, because of electoral budget constraints. Most of the participants in the electoral process of campaigning, the voters, those standing as candidates, the electoral commission, incumbent representatives, electoral commentators etc used social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp Messenger – as organizing agents. From this use of social media as an organizing agent, my interest piqued towards analysing their individual and combined influence in relation to Zimbabwe’s democracy.

CHAPTER 1

Context and Background: Social media, the internet, and democracy in Africa.

Introduction:

This chapter presents the background and context of the research using several connecting thematic sections. The chapter starts by charting how the concept of social media is understood and provides detailed descriptions of each of the three platforms explored in this thesis, Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp Messenger. Each platform is critical in establishing whether the influence digital media exert on society and culture has encouraged new forms of political communication in the public sphere. The succeeding sections focus firstly on the penetration of the Internet and social media in Africa. The chapter then reviews the uses and roles of social media in the democratic experience in Africa. The next section analyses the use of social media in cyber-activism and protest by examining its democratization potential. The chapter then concludes with an outline of the key research questions of this thesis and the content demarcation of the successive chapters. First, the chapter will start by defining social media which are the very foundation the present research is built on.

Social Media:

Social media are a group of interactive internet-based applications that are built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0[3]. The present research uses the definition of social media which describes them as "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site" (Boyd and Ellison, 2007: 211).

This study analyses three of these web-based services; Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp Messenger in attempting to measure how they influence egalitarianism in Zimbabwe and the African continent. In using Zimbabwe as a case study, the present research attempts to situate this social media research as a "decolonial approach that privileges qualitative methods in ways that position African digital experiences as "epistemic sites" of knowledge production in digital media scholarship" (Schoon et al, 2020: 1). Therefore, in this decolonial approach to

[3] Web 2.0 refers to websites that emphasize user-generated content, ease of use, participatory culture, and interoperability for end users (O'reilly, 2005).

African digital media research methods an entrenched over-reliance on Western methodological approaches is challenged by this study. Thus, this research seeks to add new scholarship about Africa's social media use for democratization processes considering the view by Ahmed et al (2016) that in economically developing countries (Africa) with low internet penetration, Twitter's role in politics is largely unknown. Additionally, others (Emmer and Kunst, 2018) also argue that most studies on the role of ICTs in political participation and political communication research reflect a Western-centric understanding of politics and participation.

The summative descriptions of the three platforms used in the present research are as follows –

Twitter:

Twitter is a web-based microblogging interactive service launched in 2006 that allows registered users to send short status messages to others. Thus, Twitter is a "microblogging technology which is specifically designed to broadcast short but regular bursts of content to particularly large audiences well beyond a user's direct social network" (Murthy, 2018: 12). Twitters' capacity to offer massive amounts of tweets that can be computationally scraped and analysed has given rise to whole new fields of social science and humanities research. So great is the influence of Twitter that "many journalists, academics, and politicians are virtually dependent on it as a social listening, professional dialogue, and public relations tool, and it is widely considered an essential component of civic infrastructure for emergency communication" (Burgess and Baym, 2020: 4). Unlike other social networking sites, the relationship of following and being followed requires no reciprocation on the platform. Kwak et al (2010) state that a user can follow any other user, and the user being followed does not necessarily have to follow back. The "@" feature is the key to Twitter's role as a medium for conversation, and is essential for creating, maintaining, and enlivening connections among users (Burgess and Baym, 2020).

Twitter users interact with one another through retweets and mentions. The retweet mechanism permits users to spread information of their choice beyond the reach of the original followers of a profile. They sometimes also serve as a form of endorsement to the original tweet. Retweeting is one of the most significant metrics of attention and success on the platform, it makes tracking (and monetizing) attention far easier. Thus, third-party services (Burgess and Baym, 2020) have emerged like Favstar.fm which tracks retweets and likes on popular tweets or, for a fee, to provide detailed information on how often and by whom

one's own tweets were shared by others. Another third-party service, Klout, has created proprietary algorithms to determine which individuals on various social media platforms are 'influencers[4].' These third-party services among others are easily able to use retweets (as well as follower counts) as one measure of influence, and hence social status.

Mentions (Boyd et al, 2008; Kwak et al, 2010) are those tweets that contain any usernames or tweets with replies. Twitter's most sociologically interesting feature is that it allows users to have dialogues. Honey and Herring (2009) state that users can indicate whether they wish their tweets to be public. This would mean that their tweets appear on the public timeline on Twitter's home page, and on the individual users' page. They can also choose that their tweets be private, meaning that only those who follow and are followed by a user are able to see the tweets.

Research by Java et al (2007) on user intentions establishes that the largest and most common use of Twitter is daily chatter where people dialog about daily routines, trending topics, share information and news on current events. Twitter has also become a legitimate communication channel in the political domain as it reflects political sentiment by being used as a platform for civic political deliberation. In 2008, former USA president Barack Obama successfully used social media in his presidential campaign. Tumasjan et al (2010) argue that this success established social media, particularly Twitter and Facebook, as integral parts of the political campaign toolbox.

Best and Meng (2015) posit that social media offers new ways for citizens to discuss and debate politics and engage in the democratic process. Social media platforms can be places for rich policy relevant debate – favoured by scholars of deliberative democracy. Alternatively, they can be platforms for an identity driven form of political discourse that is routinely scorned by scholars of democracy. Thus, to examine these two possibilities Best and Meng (2015) analyse tweets sent during three national elections (the defining participatory process of democracy) from three African countries, Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya from 2011 to 2013. The findings are such that in Nigeria, where divisive identity politics feed violence and electoral misconduct, discussion of tribe, region, and religion dominate mentions of platform policies. In contrast Ghanaians, who enjoy the most robust democracy of the three countries, were seven times more likely to discuss policy issues rather than identity. Kenyan democracy is still undergoing consolidation, and the tweets

[4] Influencers in social media are people who have built a reputation for their knowledge and expertise on a specific topic. They make regular posts about that topic on their preferred social media channels and generate large followings of enthusiastic, engaged people who pay close attention to their views.

reflect this, with almost as many tweets devoted to tribal identity as campaign policy. Therefore, Best and Meng (2015) conclude that these findings suggest that social media discussions (in this case on Twitter) may echo the state of democratic deepening found in a country during its national elections. Hence, "while Twitter can serve as a public space for divisive hate speech, Nigerian, Ghanaian, and Kenyan citizens are beginning to use the platform to advocate for democratic values and engage in deliberative democracy" (Best and Meng, 2015: 9).

Facebook, discussed below, is one of the most popular means of communication and enjoys impressive user figures.

Facebook:

Facebook (2019) says that as of December 2018, the social networking site had more than 2.3 billion active users monthly. Each registered user on Facebook has a personal profile that shows their posts and content (Ross et al, 2009). Ellison et al (2007) state that the initial purpose of Facebook was to allow university students to create and maintain social ties which were relevant to the university experience. Today, Facebook receives prominent media coverage especially on controversies surrounding user privacy. Mahdawi (2018) adds that the business regularly faces intense pressure over censorship and sometimes allowing the posting of content that users find objectionable. The activities performed on Facebook; connecting with others, expressing preferences, and providing status updates leaves behind profuse amounts of concrete and observable data. These observable abundant then make Facebook one of the most indispensable sites for reviewing social media's influence on human sociality. In 2014, Facebook acquired WhatsApp Messenger – a freeware, cross-platform, and Voice over IP (VoIP) messaging service launched in 2009.

WhatsApp Messenger:

There are over a billion estimated users who use WhatsApp Messenger for video and voice messages. The platform also allows the sharing of images, PDF documents, geographical locations in one-to-one communication or groups. In 2016, the platform introduced end-to-end encryption to protect user's privacy so that they communicate without the risk of their messages being read or intercepted (Metz, 2016; Tactical Tech, n.d.). This Facebook owned app – WhatsApp – has since become the default mode of telecommunication, particularly in urban areas according to Cheeseman et al (2020). Because it is encrypted, it is also favoured by government operatives trying to spread messages surreptitiously, and by opposition activists who seek to evade government controls in competitive authoritarian states such as Zimbabwe.

However, in early 2021 WhatsApp users received a notification informing them of a new privacy policy in the works for the messaging app[5]. Part of the notification said that the messaging app had reserved the rights to share some user data with Facebook (Cordon, 2021). This sparked global outcries and a rush of new users to competitor private messaging apps including Telegram and Signal. Telegram is a cloud-based mobile and desktop messaging app with a focus on security and speed. The service also provides end-to-end encrypted video calling, VoIP[6], file sharing and several other features (Telegram, 2021). Signal is a cross-platform centralized encrypted messaging service which uses the internet to send one-to-one and group messages, which can include files, voice notes, images, and videos (Signal, 2021). Concerned WhatsApp users feared that the messaging app was watering down its privacy policy in the process. This has led to WhatsApp delaying the update which Facebook Inc said was aimed at increasing business transactions on the platform (Paul and Vengattil, 2021).

Although the present research focuses on Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp Messenger, concerns about the use and sharing of private data held by these apps is making relatively new players – Telegram and Signal – appealing to users. In Zimbabwe, the consensus is that Telegram and Signal will not catch on. Muhamba (2021) argues that there are two broad reasons for this, the first is that people are familiar with WhatsApp and learning another app is not something many would want to do. The second and most important is that Telegram does not have a dedicated bundle on any of Zimbabwe's mobile network operators. Additionally, Dzoma (2021) claims that that Zimbabweans just do not care about their privacy at all. Besides, WhatsApp in Zimbabwe has a well-established community and phone ecosystem which includes certified WhatsApp installers.

In sum, social media has become a key medium through which we communicate with each other and "it is at the centre of the very structures of our daily interactions. Yet this infiltration is not unique to interpersonal relations. Political leaders, governments, and states operate within this social media environment, wherein they continually address crises and institute damage control through platforms such as Twitter" (Duncombe, 2019: 409). Hence, Twitter accounts affiliated with governments, state leaders, and policymakers are ostensibly used to communicate directly to domestic and foreign publics, as a key public

[5] App is short for "application," which is the same as a software programme. While an app may refer to a programme for any hardware platform, it is most often used to describe programmes for mobile devices, such as smartphones and tablets.

[6] Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), also called IP telephony, is a method and group of technologies for the delivery of voice communications and multimedia sessions over Internet Protocol (IP) networks, such as the Internet.

diplomacy or "#DigitalDiplomacy" outreach strategy. Other scholars (Bosch et al, 2020) establish that social media retains the key advantage of facilitating political discussions. Moreover, digital media platforms such as Facebook pages constitute a realization and an extension of the original public sphere. These social media platforms facilitate the expression of diverse political views including minority and marginalized views. The public sphere is an area in social life where individuals can come together to freely discuss and identify societal problems, and through that discussion influence political action (Habermas, 1962).

Consequently, the next sections of this chapter will chronicle the experience of social media use in the African public sphere by citizens in freely discussing and identifying societal problems to influence political action. Firstly, I will chart the pervasiveness of the internet in Africa.

The internet experience in Africa:

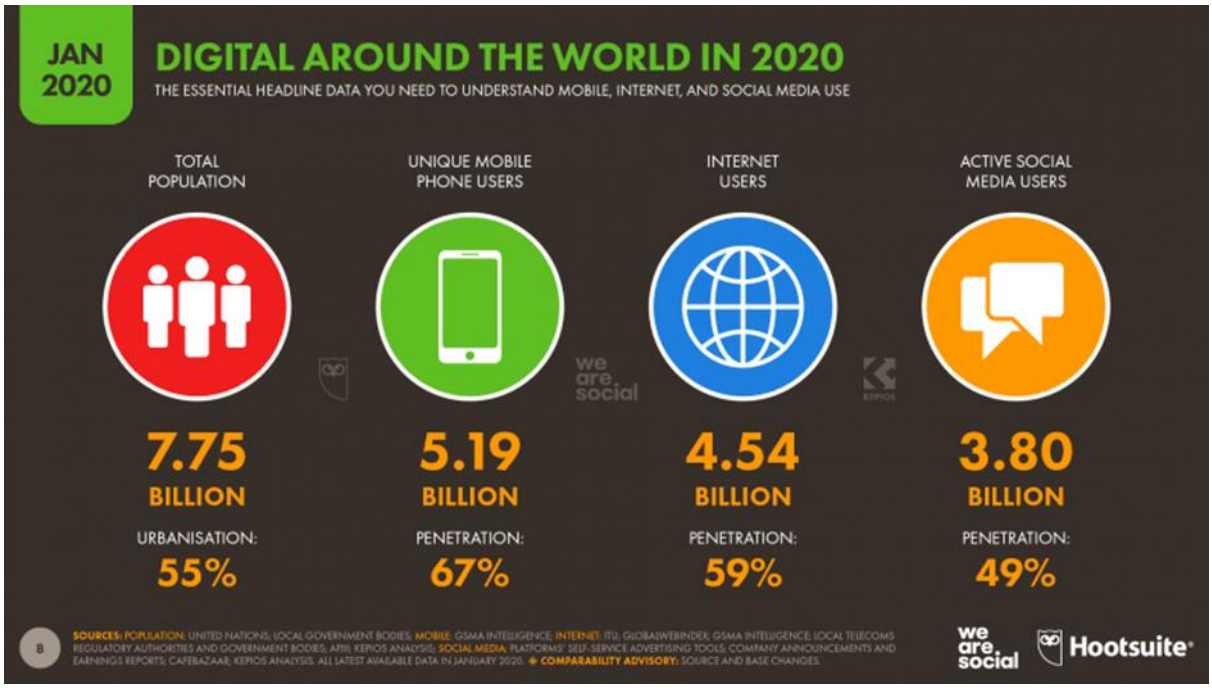
"The emergence of the internet and related technologies has brought profound economic and social change, arguably on a scale paralleled only by the invention of the printing press" (Young and Akerstrom, 2015:1). In Africa, there has been an increased use of the internet in the last decade as attempts to close the digital gap with the western world intensify. In 2015, Africa's broadband household penetration was 15.4 percent against the then world average of 52.3 percent. This disparity is attributed to factors like access, costs, censorship, lack of infrastructure, technophobia and a low technological literacy which limit participation on the Internet (Evans, 2018b, 2018c).

Today "more than 4.5 billion people now use the internet, while social media users have passed the 3.8 billion mark. Nearly 60 percent of the world's population is already online, and the latest trends suggest that more than half of the world's total population will use social media by the middle of this year" (Kemp, 2020: 1). See Figure 1.0 for the visualization of this contemporary global scale of this internet and social media use.

With the uptake of the internet in the world intensifying, Africa has demonstrated its capacity to keep up. The Internet penetration rate has meaningfully improved especially between 2015 and 2020. This progress comes amid the challenge of access, costs, censorship, lack of infrastructure, technophobia, and a low technological literacy. Crucially, this progression presents an opportunity for digital naturals to engage in the digital politics that are re-shaping the political landscape for most of the world. Figure 1.1 shows the significant improvement of Africa's penetration rate to 39.3%. Though, this is still below the world average of

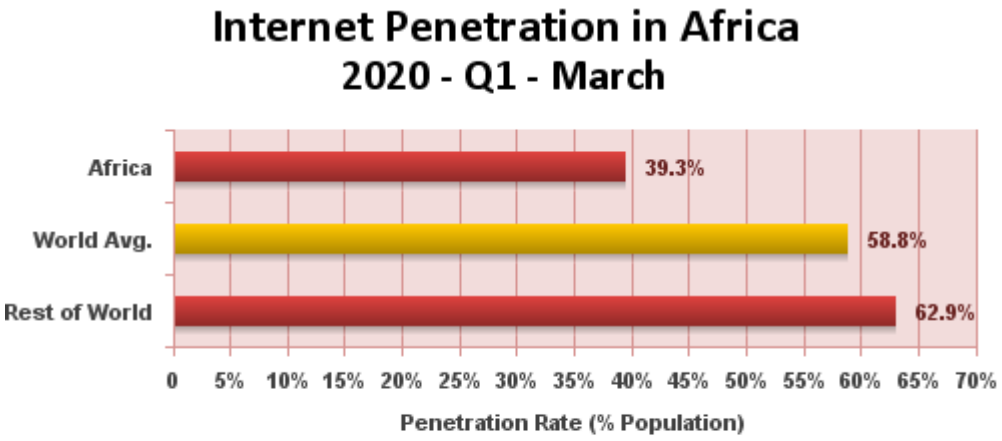
58.8% (see Figure 1.2) as the continent only has 11.5% of Internet users against the worlds' 88.5%.

Fig.1.0



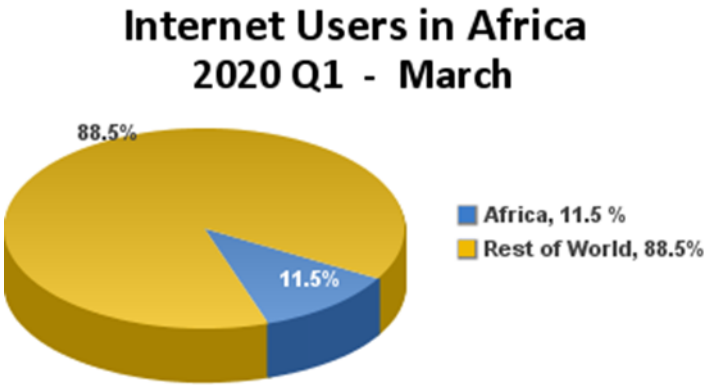
Source: WeAreSocial/Hootsuite

Fig.1.1.



Source: Internet World Stats - www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm
526,710,313 estimated Internet users in Africa in March 31, 2020 and
4,585,578,718 Internet users in all the World in March, 2020
Copyright © 2020, Miniwatts Marketing Group

Fig.1.2.



Source: Internet World Stats - www.internetworldstats.com
526,710,313 estimated Internet users in Africa in March, 2020, representing 11.5% of the total world Internet users, estimated at 4,585,578,718. Copyright © 2020, Miniwatts Marketing Group

Democracy and the role of social media in Africa:

Most of Africa is still confronting the legacy of colonialism having attained independence largely from British and French rule in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This has resulted in the concurrent implementation of democracy and development where eminence is usually placed on one or the other, but never uniformly and consistently (Adebayo, 2018). A direct consequence of this have been that for most countries in the continent the principal criterion for democracy has become the holding of elections and simply letting citizens vote (Fomunyam, 2018).

Additionally, Gumede (2016) says these African administrations have also managed to dodge the demands of accountability and democratization by steadfastly manipulating legacy media, i.e., "media originally distributed using a pre-Internet medium (print, radio, television) …" (Miel & Faris, 2008:3). Here, they frequently exploit the flow of news and withhold or manipulate information (in radio and television broadcasts, and newspapers) that exposes citizens to the true state of their ineptitude, maladministration, and corruption. Perceived government critics, opposition politicians and civil society groups are often side-lined, vilified, and projected as lacking credibility by these state-owned legacy media (Cavatorta 2012; Gumede 2010, 2012; Habib 2016). Nevertheless, with the advent of social media which has enabled citizens to access alternative sources of information, the principal criterion of merely holding elections is now being challenged. African citizens have become politically critical and started demanding accountability and democratization – the introduction of democratic systems or principles. The digital disruption of politics is fast making the manipulation of legacy media strenuous to manage and implement.

As practices of digital politics amplify, we see the escalation of internet regulation by governments in Africa and around the world. Globally, there were 75 Internet shutdowns in 2016, this rose to 108 in 2017, and by 2018, 188 were recorded. Africa was affected by 4 Internet shutdowns in 2016 which increased to 13 in 2017, and 21 were recorded in 2018 (Giles, 2019). The escalation of shutdowns between 2016 and 2017 saw access to Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp blocked by Burundi, Chad, Congo, Ethiopia, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe (Roberts et al, 2021).

The Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa has critiqued recent shutdowns in Zimbabwe, Gabon, the DRC, Sudan, and Chad and noted that internet and social media shutdowns violate the right to freedom of expression and access to information contrary to Article 9 of the African Charter (Nyokabi et al, 2019). African governments order internet shutdowns without complying with the standard three-part test for human rights limitations, namely, that the limitation should be anchored by law; it must be necessary in a democratic society; and it must be in pursuit of a legitimate aim (Ilori, 2019). Therefore, these orders by governments not only violate international law but also do great and avoidable damage to the socioeconomic prospects of most of these African countries.

In Zambia, the Minister of Communications, Brian Mushambi, defended the actions saying that,

> "It is evident that social media in Zambia has become a catalyst for the detachment of members of the Zambian society from our cultural norms. Prior to the proliferation of social media, people in Zambia behaved and communicated within acceptable and expected cultural boundaries" (Chutel, 2018: 1).

Here, a politician likened critical political thinking – a most basic tenet of democracy – which was exhibited in the use of social media by Zambians as a detachment from cultural norms. Zambian citizens were holding the government accountable to their democratization demands via social media.

As governments like Zambia and others resort to disrupting the internet and blocking the use of social media, citizens find themselves having to bypass these limitations. The most common way most citizens globally have used to circumvent Internet disruptions has been to use Virtual Private Networks (VPNs).

Virtual Private Networks (VPNs):

VPNs allow for online privacy and anonymity by creating a private network from a public Internet connection and they mask the Internet Protocol (IP) address[7] so that online actions are virtually untraceable. VPNs establish secure and encrypted connections to provide greater IP privacy by disguising locations and concealing browsing history (Symanovich, 2020). These qualities become useful when activists, government critics, opposition politicians, civil society groups, and marginalised citizens use social media to challenge the political status quo. In 2016, Ugandans successfully circumvented Internet restrictions by using VPNs (Ogola, 2019).

VPNs are also remarkably helpful in the creation of web-fuelled social movements that empower interest groups in accomplishing their primary goal – protest (Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia, 2014). These web-fuelled social movements have come to change the landscape of collective action. The mobilization of collective action, creation, organization, and implementation of protest by social movements also presents an emergent and growing field of scholarly inquiry – cyber-activism (Eltantawy and Wiest, 2011). In Africa, cyber-activism was initiated and established by the anti-government protests, uprisings, and armed rebellions that spread across much of the Arab world in December 2010 and the first months of 2011 commonly known as the Arab Spring (Howard and Hussain, 2012).

Cyber-Activism and Protests in Africa:

Cyber-activism is the process of using internet-based socializing and communication techniques to create, operate and manage activism of any type. It allows any individual or organization to utilize social networks and other online technologies to reach and gather followers, broadcast messages, and progress a cause or movement. Cyber-activism is also known as internet activism, online activism, digital activism, online organizing, electronic advocacy, e-campaigning, and e-activism (Techopedia, 2017).

Cyber-activism's basic working principle is like that of standard physical activism, to initiate a citizen-based movement toward a specific goal, cause, or objective. Cyber-activism uses social networking tools and platforms to share and broadcast mottos and messages, and to interact with netizens. These platforms include Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, YouTube and other popular and niche social networks, along with email, instant messaging (IM) and other online

[7] The IP address is a series of numbers and periods that identify a computer that is using the Internet to send and receive data over a network (Symanovich, 2020).

collaboration tools. Depending on the cause or need of the e-activist, cyber-activism can be used for various purposes, such as awareness creation, gathering and organizing followers and initiating reactions (Techopedia, 2017).

In Africa, much of the mainstream research on cyber-activism (Chapsos and Frangonikolopoulos, 2012; Segev et al, 2013; Allam, 2014; Khamis and Vaughn, 2014) has centred on the Arab Spring. This Arab Spring has led to Twitter being associated with wide-ranging forms of socio-political activism – citizen actions intended to influence public policy or change social structures (Murthy, 2018). The Arab Spring was a series of anti-government protests, uprisings, and armed rebellions that spread across much of the Arab world in December 2010 and the first months of 2011(Howard and Hussain, 2012).

Tunisia is often credited with sparking the Arab uprisings. However, the stage had already been set in Egypt by existing protest movements and a network of activist groups. This marked the piloting of cyber-civil society and the virtual replacement for muzzled media (Khondker, 2011). The Arab media landscape had been observing "a gap between the vibrant and active media arena, where many resistant and oppositional voices could be heard, on one hand, and on the other hand the dormant and stagnant political arena, which did not exhibit any serious signs of active change, popular participation, or true democratization" (Khamis and Vaughn, 2011: 2). The response to this was the Arab Spring which spread across the Arabic-speaking countries of North Africa and the Middle East through anti-government protests, uprisings, and unrest. Blakemore (2019) states that Tunisia's political repression and the censorship of its media created a unique socio-political environment that cultivated the widespread use of social media. Protests were documented on mobile phones and information shared on various social media. Political discussions on blogs foreshadowed the turn of popular opinion. Conversations about liberty, democracy and revolutions on blogs and Twitter instantly preceded mass protests (Joyce 2011; Khamis and Vaughn, 2013).

The resignation of Egypt's president, Hosni Mubarak, raised international awareness on the role of social media in broadcasting dissenting positions (Kirkpatrick, 2011; Sharp, 2011). Mobile phones, Twitter, and Facebook are duly credited with increasing the ability of Egyptians to mobilize quickly and efficiently to raise awareness of the protests to a global audience (Dreyfuss, 2011; Radsch, 2011). The political situation in Tunisia and Egypt saw neighbouring countries average 2 300 tweets a day. When the rest of the world caught on, this grew to approximately 230 000 tweets a day. Videos featuring protest and political commentary went viral with the top 23 videos receiving nearly 5.5 million views.

There was also a marked increase in the production of online content on Facebook and political blogs (O'Donnell, 2011).

Cyber-activists used new media to politically express themselves, inform others of abuses by the state, and organize protests and acts of resistance against authoritarian regimes. They ensured that their voices were heard by telling their side of the story. New media was effectively deployed as a tool for protesters to enhance their agency and capabilities in mobilizing for protest action (Khamis and Vaughn, 2011). Outside of North Africa, others like Kenya, Nigeria and Zambia also began to innovatively reshape social media use to raise political awareness during national elections (Bing, 2015). These actions supplemented the common political practices of creating alternative political spheres. Political participation was stimulated, and democratic debates broadened by transgressing hierarchies and creating more informal communicative networks (Iheagwara, 2013). Former president of Nigeria, Goodluck Jonathan, successfully utilised Facebook to engage with Nigerian citizens during the 2011 presidential elections. He took the unprecedented decision of announcing his presidential candidacy on Facebook. In Zambia, the civil society used social media to monitor incidents related to the 2011 presidential elections (Chatora, 2012). African cyber-activism also saw the increase in protest campaigns which gained considerable international support by using hashtags. The term "Hashtag activism" was coined by The Guardian[8] in 2011 to describe the Occupy Wall Street protests and the corresponding hashtag campaign, #OccupyWallStreet. Since then, hundreds of hashtags have been created to build communities of activists eager to share information and raise their voices (Chubb, 2018). In Africa, hashtag activism has seen South Africa's #FeesMustFall, Nigeria's #BringBackOurGirls, Uganda's #Kony2012, and North Africa's #ArabSpring define cyber-activism in the continent (IT News Africa, 2017).

Hashtags are a tool used for the purpose of information organization and management. Hashtags make following specific discussions on social media, precisely Twitter, easier to follow and they are also used for the purpose of tagging and organizing tweets (Shapp, 2014). Burgess and Baym (2020) posit that no single character has been as iconic a symbol of Twitter as the now- ubiquitous hashtag. The syntax of the hashtag has a few simple rules: it consists of the hash symbol (#) immediately followed by a string of alphanumeric characters, with no spaces or punctuation. It is used routinely in social media communication across several platforms. The hashtag has even made its way off the internet, "appearing

[8] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2011/sep/29/occupy-wall-street-protest

regularly on television, in advertising, on products, and on protest signs around the world" (Burgess and Baym, 2020: 61).

The power of hashtag activism became clear in 2011, when #IranElection served as an organizing tool for Iranians protesting a disputed election and offered a global audience a front-row seat to a nascent revolution. Since then, activists have used a variety of hashtags, including #JusticeForTrayvon, #BlackLivesMatter, #YesAllWomen, and #MeToo to advocate, mobilize, and communicate. Yang (2016) states that hashtag activism happens when large numbers of postings appear on social media under a common hashtagged word, phrase, or sentence with a social or political claim. Thus, the temporal unfolding of these mutually connected postings in networked spaces gives them a narrative form and agency. In the book '*# HashtagActivism: Networks of race and gender justice*' Jackson et al (2020) show how marginalized groups, long excluded from elite media spaces, have used Twitter hashtags to advance counternarratives, pre-empt political spin, and build diverse networks of dissent.

Cyber-activism has also benefitted resource poor actors as an additional mechanism for their social pursuits. The previous disadvantage of financial, temporal, or spatial constraints is now limited as cyber-activity enables means for mass communication (Della Porta and Mosca, 2005). HIV/AIDS activists whose activism significantly grew between the late 1980s and early 1990s have since used cyber-activity to their advantage, by publicizing treatment options, and the cultural and political activities of people living with the disease (Gillet, 2005). Muslim feminists in the Middle East also fostered communication with other Muslim women in the diaspora to promote social initiatives and to show support for each other's struggles (Moghadam, 2000).

In sum, cyber-activism demonstrates that social media influences effective collective action with speed and interactivity. Mobilizing information and news is shared in these platforms without the regulation and manipulation of governments (Chadwick and Howard, 2008; Bennett and Segerberg, 2011; Gil de Zúñiga and Valenzuela, 2011). Citizens participate in collective actions by following events, joining groups, and engaging in online dialogs (Eltantawy and Wiest, 2011). It such actions that have led to the present research formulating questions that attempt to determine how cyber-activism via social media in Zimbabwe has influenced the democratization processes in the country.

Tucker et al (2017) assert that social media has indubitably influenced democracy in that the platforms "give a voice to those whose views are normally excluded from political discussions in the mainstream media" (47).) They argue that by using

social media people can find like-minded activists, organize protests and movements, and support political candidates and parties. Hence, the premise of the Tucker et al (2017) argument is that by using social media the collective action problems that have long frustrated those traditionally shut out of mainstream politics can be solved. Thus, social media can contribute to new means of holding governments accountable and pressing for wider political inclusion. Nevertheless, Tucker et al recognise that social media can also "amplify other and more extreme voices as well, including those which, from the point of view of liberal democracy, are "antisystem." (2017: 47). This brings us to the next section which explores how social media can also be detrimental to the ideals of democracy.

Social Media and the Erosion of Democracy:

A common contention about the expediency of social media use in democracy has been that "the very openness of the social-media environment can be used to foster censorship" (Tucker et al, 2017: 47). Hence, authoritarian regimes also use social media to apply the use of various forms of online harassment to muzzle critics, propaganda, distraction, and to shut down or distort the information space. Consequently, social media then expose a double reality of the open online world – they give a voice to the voiceless and are also bendable toward the aims of censorship and exclusion. Thus, Tucker et al (2017) ultimately theorise that "social media constitute a space in which political interests battle for influence, and not all these interests are liberal or democratic" (2017: 48).

Haidt and Rose-Stockwell (2019) also contend that social media is harmful to democracy. They argue that due to Facebook's early goal to make the world more open and connected, many people assumed that a huge global increase in connectivity would be good for democracy. However, this has not been the case as the increased uptake of social media has since led to the diminishing optimism of social media's positive influence on democracy. Haidt and Rose-Stockwell (2019) contend that the problem is not the connectivity itself but rather the way social media turns so much communication into a public performance. They argue that the launch of the News Feed by Facebook and the addition of the "Like" button created a public metric for the popularity of content. Another transformative innovation by Facebook – the algorithm that determined which posts a user would see, based on predicted "engagement" – was also developed. As a result, "the News Feed's algorithmic ordering of content flattened the hierarchy of credibility" (Haidt and Rose-Stockwell, 2019: 1). Any post by a producer could stick to the top of news feeds so long as it generated engagement which led to fake news flourishing which has raised problems for the stability of democracy.

Walsh (2020) argues that social media platforms are instrumental in the spread of fake news, with the intent to cause fear and panic among citizens. Fake news that is propagated through social media platforms also has implications on the economic well-being of a nation. For example, Mugari (2020) argues that in 2013, the Associated Press's Twitter account was hacked and released a tweet falsely claiming that there had been two explosions at the White House and that President Obama had been injured. Within a few minutes, the tweet had reached US stock traders and the Dow Jones dropped over 143 points (a $136.5 billion loss).

On the other hand, Anderson and Rainie assert that "the years of almost unfettered enthusiasm about the benefits of the internet have been followed by a period of techlash as users worry about the actors who exploit the speed, reach and complexity of the internet for harmful purposes" (2020: 3). They argue that in the last four years the digital disruption of democracy has been a leading concern. Thus, they (Anderson and Rainie, 2020) sought the comment of 979 technology innovators, developers, business and policy leaders, researchers, and activists to gain their insights about the potential future effects of people's use of technology on democracy. Anderson and Rainie (2020) found that many of these experts argued that digital disruption will hurt democracy. "About half of the experts responding to this canvassing said people's uses of technology will mostly weaken core aspects of democracy and democratic representation, but even those who expressed optimism often voiced concerns. This section includes comments about problems that were made by all respondents regardless of their answer to the main question about the impact of technology on democracy by 2030" (Anderson and Rainie, 2020: 1). These worries are organized under seven themes.

1. Empowering the powerful: Corporate and government agendas generally do not serve democratic goals or achieve democratic outcomes. They serve the goals of those in power.
2. Diminishing the governed: Digitally networked surveillance capitalism creates an undemocratic class system pitting the controllers against the controlled.
3. Exploiting digital illiteracy: Citizens' lack of digital fluency and their apathy produce an ill-informed and/or dispassionate public, weakening democracy and the fabric of society.
4. Waging info-wars: Technology can be weaponized by anyone, anywhere, anytime to target vulnerable populations and engineer elections.
5. Sowing confusion: Tech-borne reality distortion is crushing the already-shaky public trust in the institutions of democracy.

6. Weakening journalism: There seems to be no solution for problems caused by the rise of social media-abetted tribalism and the decline of trusted, independent journalism.
7. Responding too slowly: The speed, scope, and impact of the technologies of manipulation may be difficult to overcome as the pace of change accelerates.

In sum, in as much as the internet and social media help democratize, they also weaken democracy. In *Social Media and International Relations,* Kreps (2020) argues that the rise of social media undermines democratic regimes and gives authoritarian regimes the advantage. Therefore, citizens who turn to social media as a marketplace of ideas increasingly confront misinformation, often strategically deployed by foreign actors seeking to exploit polarization in the political landscape and undermine trust in domestic institutions. Thus, Kreps (2020) concludes that in the age of social media, there are more questions than answers.

The next section outlines the key research questions explored in this study, in the hope that it may shed light into the effect of social media use for democracy in Zimbabwe.

Research Questions:

Twitter in Zimbabwe has helped those Zimbabweans who are online to counter the effects of the government's repressive laws such as the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) (2001) and the Miscellaneous Offenses Act (Chapter 9: 15) (2001), which severely limited public debate and criticism of government (Ncube, 2017). In the lead up to the 2018 polls it was widely expected that there would be regulation and repression of Internet rights during and after the plebiscite (Kalemera et al, 2016). These expectations were premised on the fact that since Zimbabwe's 1980 Independence from British rule, the successive governments led by President Robert Mugabe have wielded rigid monopoly over all state media. Independent media have been under constant assault, and in certain circumstances shut down.

After Mugabe's ouster by his protégé Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa who succeeded him as ruler, he broke tradition and signed up on social media platforms. Mnangagwa has verified[9] Facebook and Twitter accounts. With this act, the freedom of speech remarkably improved with Zimbabweans openly criticizing the government without fear of retribution. Yet, most critics and a large section of

[9] A verified social media account is a badge with a check that appears next to the account's name on the profile. It means that the account is confirmed to be an authentic account for a public figure, politician, celebrity, or global brand it represents.

Zimbabwean citizens remained sceptical of the new government's commitment to reform. Based on these circumstances and debates, this thesis identified questions below to try and ascertain how democratization was being influenced by social media in Zimbabwe.

1. How does social media encourage new forms of political communication in the Zimbabwean public sphere?
2. How do citizens use social media to constructively engage in political conversation and debate with each other, politicians, and the government?
3. How do citizens leverage the use of social media during elections and what impact does this have on political participation?
4. What is the nature of Emmerson Mnangagwa's use of social media and how does this affect governance within his administration and his engagement with citizens?

Outline of chapters:

This introductory chapter has provided the background and context of the present study into the role of social media in the development of democratization in Zimbabwe. The structure of the research which demarcates the content of the successive chapters is as follows:

Chapter 2 is devoted to Zimbabwe's political, electoral and media landscapes. The presentation of this context highlights the motivations behind choosing Zimbabwe as a case study.

Chapter 3 is the literature review which presents existing academic literature and analyses narratives about the influence of social media (Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp) on protest and political activism in Africa and its impact on democracy.

Chapter 4 presents the theoretical framework of the research with a discussion of the concepts of 'democratic listening' and digital citizenship.

Chapter 5 provides a comprehensive and full account of the methods and procedures employed in gathering the data for analysis.

Chapter 6 is the first of 3 chapters that focus on the findings from the 3 social media platforms used in this study, firstly, Twitter.

Chapter 7 presents and discusses the findings made in the study of Facebook in relation to the present research.

Chapter 8 presents and discusses the findings made in the study of WhatsApp in relation to the present research.

Chapter 9 concludes the research by summarising the key findings and discussions. The chapter also offers recommendations for future research and notes the limitations of the study.

The following chapter charts Zimbabwe's political, electoral and media contexts that this research is premised on, to provide context to the present study.

CHAPTER 2.

Zimbabwe: The Challenge to Democracy.

Introduction:

This chapter will highlight and analyse Zimbabwe's political background, which it argues, has shaped much of the electoral and media landscape of the country. These in turn have unfavourably contributed to the prevailing stunted growth of Zimbabwe's democratization processes. Found within these electoral and media contexts, protest culture and cyber-activism have meaningfully bourgeoned over the last few decades. In presenting the political, electoral and media background of the country, the chapter also outlines the rationale behind choosing Zimbabwe's harmonised elections as a case study.

Zimbabwe's political context is central to the present research, as it details how the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front's (ZANU-PF) colonial inheritance of the use of violence against opponents and ordinary citizens has configured the country's electoral practices. These undemocratic electoral practices in turn have fashioned a prejudiced and repressive speech and media environment. In such societies, "historically, those who live under such stifled conditions develop new forms of communication as tools of subversion" (Moyo, 2007: 81). In Zimbabwe, citizens now use social media platforms as alternative spaces for protest, dissent, and activism against authoritarianism. This authoritarianism comes in various forms with the most prominent being the influential dominance of the state security apparatus which is responsible for widespread human rights violations. The most recent violations by the military are their interventions on 1 August 2018 and mid-January 2019. On both occasions, Zimbabwe's military used live ammunition to suppress protests killing six and seventeen civilians respectively (Batyszak, 2019). The brutal response of the military, under Mnangagwa's command, has according to Batyszak (2019) also obscured other alarming marks of his authoritarian style of governance. This is not surprising as in Mnangagwa's last few months in Robert Mugabe's government, he became the driving force behind two anti-democratic changes to Zimbabwean law. The first was an amendment to the constitution that sharply curtailed the independence of the judiciary. It reduced the involvement of the Judicial Service Commission in the appointments of the chief justice and judge president of the high court to one of consultation only, essentially placing the power solely in the hands of the president. The second was a legislative amendment that severely undermined the prosecutor-general's independence. This was done by removing the right to mount private prosecutions, which had

worked as a barrier to political interference in the prosecutor-general's decision to prosecute (Batyszak, 2019).

As seen above, any discussion centred on Zimbabwe will almost always reference Robert Mugabe – president for nearly four decades. Mugabe dominated Zimbabwe's politics since Independence in 1980 and was unceremoniously ousted by his military in November 2017 after a political fallout with his devotee Mnangagwa. It is this military action that necessitated the 2018 harmonised elections, which are the foundation of the present research. In Zimbabwe, the term harmonised elections refer to the concurrent votes for the president, parliament, local authorities, and provincial councils which build the state's legislative authority. Zimbabwe employs the widely used First Past the Post[10] (FPTP) voting principle which means that the candidate with the highest number of votes is the winner (Chirimumimba, 2018). The FPTP electoral system is found most prominently in the United Kingdom (UK) and its former colonial territories. It is based on 'single member districts' – one representative is elected from each constituency. The winning candidate in each constituency is the one who receives the most votes (Fair Vote, n.d.).

As stated earlier, the understanding of Zimbabwe's political, economic and media matrix would be insufficient without referencing Mugabe. The next section will chart his downfall in a coup d'état and the subsequent aftermath.

Mugabe Falls:

On the 6th of November 2017 Mugabe fired his powerful vice-president, Emmerson Mnangagwa, who was accused by Mugabe's wife, Grace, for causing factionalism in ZANU-PF. Fearing for his life, Mnangagwa fled to South Africa and later released an angry five-page statement directed at the Mugabe's in which he threatened to return from his exile and usurp power from them. And he did. Mnangagwa, is a former intelligence chief, who has maintained strong support within the states' security establishment and veterans of Zimbabwe's 1970s guerrilla war. Despite his role in the genocide of the Ndebele ethnic group in the 1980s, much of the international community had long seen him as the main figure to guarantee a stable transition and implement economic reforms in a post-Mugabe Zimbabwe (Burke and Graham-Harrison, 2017).

After Mnangagwa's dismissal, ZANU-PF begun to purge party members who were deemed loyal to him. This led to the commander of the Zimbabwe Defence Forces

[10] Under the FPP (First Past the Post) electoral system, the candidate with the most votes wins. This is a very simple method of electing candidates and is widely used throughout the world (Te Tari Taiwhenua/ Department of Internal Affairs, 2019)

(ZDF), General Constantino Chiwenga, demanding that the party cease all expulsions. The general warned that the army was on the brink of intervening in ZANU-PF's internal affairs. On the 14th of November 2017, convoys of military tanks were seen moving on the outskirts of the Zimbabwean capital, Harare. Later that evening, the military took control of Zimbabwe's solitary television station, the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Cooperation Television (ZBC TV), and confirmed Mugabe's detention in his palatial mansion. The army insisted that Mugabe and his family were safe – they were simply targeting the criminals around him (Burke, 2017).

In Zimbabwe, this was the first ever coup but in most of Africa these are widespread. Military coups have been the main mode of leadership change in especially between 1952 and 2012 where a total of 88 were recorded, 63 of these occurred prior 1990 (Souaré, 2014). In Nigeria alone, military rule only ended in 1999. The Comoros have had at least 20 coups or attempts to seize power since it gained its independence from France in 1975. Mauritania's Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz astonishingly stepped down after two terms as required by the constitution after he was the driving force behind the 2005 and 2008 coups (Siegle, 2019). Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir, in power for three decades, was forced out of office after months of unrelenting protests in a move orchestrated by the military. Al-Bashir came to power in 1989 when he led a group of officers in a military coup that ousted the democratically elected government. He was a Brigadier in the Sudanese Army at the time (Siegle, 2019). In Algeria, ailing ruler Abdelaziz Bouteflika faced mounting pressure to step down. This is after he took a decision to seek a fifth term, despite rarely being seen in public since suffering a stroke in 2013. Bouteflika was first elected in 1999 with the backing of the military, in a race boycotted by all other candidates and widely panned as fraudulent (Siegle, 2019). Such has been the experience of Africa where militaries often influence the election of its leaders while suppressing democratic processes.

Mnangagwa Rises:

Soon after Mugabe's detention he was removed as president. Mnangagwa returned from exile to a swift swearing in as Zimbabwe's new ruler since the 1980. True to form, Mnangagwa appointed military men to his very first cabinet most notably, Maj. Gen. Sibusiso Moyo as Foreign Affairs Minister, Air Marshal Perrance Shiri as Agriculture Minister and Chris Mutsvangwa, leader of Zimbabwe's war veterans, as Information Minister. Moyo announced the military takeover that had put Mugabe under house arrest and set-in motion his removal as president. Shiri is directly linked to the Matabeleland killings of thousands of people by a North

Korea-trained military brigade in the 1980s when Mugabe moved against a political rival. General Constantino Chiwenga, the commander of the Zimbabwe Defence Forces which had turned against its commander-in-chief, Mugabe, was installed as one of the two deputy presidents (France24, 2017).

Calls for elections were increasingly made after these events with the main opposition anticipating victory since their stumbling block in previous elections, Mugabe, was no longer part of the equation. Mnangagwa duly obliged and set 30 July 2018 as the day for electing a new president, parliamentarians, and local government councillors. Many anticipated the continuation of the unequal political field synonymous with Mugabe but were pleasantly surprised when Mnangagwa in a break with the past embraced the use of social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. All his accounts are verified[11].

Zimbabwe's netizens suddenly had renewed optimism as Mnangagwa's anticipated accessibility saw a remarkable improvement to the freedom of speech. Moreover, for many Zimbabweans who had known no other president other than Mugabe, Mnangagwa's promise of a fresh start generated considerable enthusiasm. Zimbabweans openly criticized the government without fear of retribution. Nonetheless, most critics and a large section of Zimbabwean citizens remained sceptical of the new government's commitment to reform due to Zimbabwe's intricate political context.

Zimbabwe's Political Context:

In 1980 there were high hopes for Zimbabwe's political and economic future. The country was among the top four industrialized Sub-Saharan African countries. Zimbabwe had a diversified economy, a better human resource base, and controlled a middle-income status (Sachikonye, 2002); but political commentators were concerned about the transformation to majority rule of the inherited state. ZANU-PF had not only inherited the political economy; it also inherited the power of the colonial state. They inherited monopoly over the use of force, a well-established, and particularly effective organisational structure of surveillance and control (Onslow, 2011).

To this end, ZANU-PF developed a violent intolerance and narrow vision which was detected in the very first decade of independence (Alexander and McGregor, 2013). Violence is a part of the political philosophy of ZANU-PF. Inevitably, from 1982 to 1987 the ZANU-PF government instituted violence against its own citizens

[11] A verified social media account is a badge with a check that appears next to the account's name on the profile. It means that the account is confirmed to be an authentic account for a public figure, politician, celebrity, or global brand it represents.

that resulted in a genocide, Gukurahundi. The genocide was conducted by ex-combatants who went on to have commanding positions in the newly created Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA) (Moyo, 2015). This has resulted in the amalgamation of the political party ZANU-PF, the war veterans, and the national army into one entity. This became conspicuous in the June 2000 parliamentary election campaigns when the liberation war veterans emerged as critical allies of the ruling party. This new marriage of convenience has since shaped the current electoral landscape in Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe's political context would be incomplete without mention of the political party Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) which has consistently challenged ZANU-PF since 1999. Raftopoulos (2007) argues that building opposition politics on the African continent is immensely difficult largely because of the oppressive nature of most post-colonial states and the extremely difficult structural conditions under which opposition forces must mobilise and reproduce their support. Zimbabwe is a prime example of this argument having undergone an extensive liberation struggle. ZANU-PF enjoys a strong legacy of legitimacy enjoyed by former liberation movements. However, its capacity for revived nationalist mobilisation has presented opposition forces with immense obstacles in developing alternative programmatic positions. As such, the MDC has only but managed to effusively challenge ZANU-PF.

Enter the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC):

The MDC was formed in 1999 and it quickly moved in to challenge the dominance of ZANU-PF. In its first elections, the MDC managed to win 52 parliament seats from the 120 contested. Asuelime and Simura (2014) argue that this drastically changed the political landscape of the country. The formation of the MDC in 1999 was accompanied by "massive urban support that had suffered the brunt of the beginning of the economic meltdown. It is no surprise therefore that much of the opposition came from the trade unionist movement in the name of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU)" (Asuelime and Simura, 2014: 70). ZANU-PF theorizes that the MDC was formed because of external interference in the Zimbabwean political economy. Accordingly, ZANU-PF argues that the MDC was created by Britain to counter the land reform program and the policies of Black Economic Empowerment (Indigenization).

However, since its formation in 1999, the MDC's electoral narratives have focused on socio-economic, cultural, and political change. Gwekwerere and Mpondi (2018) assert that in these narratives ZANU-PF has been criticised for failing to live up to the agenda of the liberation struggle of the 1960s and 1970s. In the run up to the

2018 harmonised elections, the MDC now known as the MDC-A (Alliance) electoral narrative was that "Zimbabwe has endured 38 years of a vacuous leadership under an arrogant ZANU-PF elite that has denied citizens a say in the way the state is governed" (MDC Alliance Manifesto, 2018: 2). The MDC became the MDC Alliance because of an electoral block formed between seven political parties on 6 August 2017 (Dube, 2017). Gwekwerere and Mpondi (2018) say that the MDC-A party identifies capture, coercion, and corruption as the three key instruments used in repressing the aspirations of our people. Thus, they (the MDC-A) argue that they are a panacea to this abuse of citizens by the ZANU-PF government. Other MDC-A electoral narratives "stress restructuring and resizing of government downwards, restoration of the rule of law, respect of property rights, devolution of power, combating of corruption and protection of Zimbabwe's liberation heritage" (Gwekwerere and Mpondi, 2018: 7). Such is the history of the advent of the MDC which has gone on to be present ZANU-PF with its most formidable electoral opponent since 1980 and in the process shaping Zimbabwe's electoral landscape.

The Electoral Landscape:

Zimbabwe's first two post-independence elections in 1980 and 1985 were generally passed as a credible expression of the will of the people. But subsequent elections have been largely contested, with allegations of rigging, gerrymandering, vote-buying, and coercion, among several other irregularities. After facing a serious electoral threat from the fledgling Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), ZANU-PF forged an alliance with the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans' Association (ZNLWVA). The war veterans, at the behest of ZANU-PF, "spearheaded the invasion and occupation of white commercial farmers' land, led compulsory political education sessions in the rural areas, and terrorized farm workers and others suspected of being opposition supporters" (Kriger, 2003: 104). For these services, the ZNLWVA was paid using party money and ZANU-PF provided other types of assistance for these war veterans. The party gave them access to army, intelligence and police logistical support and absolute protection against the rule of law. The continued dominance of ZANU-PF is thus intimately connected to the reorganisation of state structures and its role in state sponsored violence and intimidation (Onslow, 2011).

Party and war veterans' leaders always invoke their liberation war credentials to justify their land grabbing and they present the opposition as a neo-colonial party which threatens to turn back the gains of the liberation struggle (Kriger, 2003). Hence, the war veterans and by extension all the states' security apparatus, the ZNA, the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP), and the Central Intelligence

Organization (CIO) have repeatedly participated in the 2002, 2005, 2008, and 2013 election campaigns. War veterans are used in the delimitation of voter registration, voter education, campaigning, and for the manning of command centres during elections. They revive their war mode which embraces shocking levels of electoral violence to benefit ZANU-PF's monopoly of government (Chitiyo 2000; Alexander and Tendi, 2008; Masunungure and Bratt, 2008; Gonda, 2013).

The elections in 2002 and 2008 were particularly violent with many citizens killed, maimed, raped, tortured, and displaced. Property and investments worth billions of dollars were also lost (Njeru, 2018). However, in the March 2008 elections, a discernible electoral shift began to appear. The advent of new communications technologies – the Internet and mobile phones – steered in a new era of political communication.

The Elections Model Shifts:

In the March 2008 elections, citizens began to participate in election campaigns and monitoring processes due to the availability of the Internet and the rapid uptake in the use of mobile phones. Zimbabwe's ordinary citizens and members of civil society started using their mobile phones for electoral monitoring processes. For the first time the mobile phone, a part of Zimbabwean social life since the late 1990s, began to play a momentous political role and this posed a great challenge to ZANU-PF's 28-year rule (Moyo, 2010). Many Zimbabweans no longer relied on the regulated state-owned media or the gagged private press for information.

ZANU-PF inherited a colonial media structure in which journalism was dominated by the imperial need to control the subjugated people. The colonial state employed journalists to ensure that government officials created links between themselves and the people. This made the journalists of that era mere colonial government messengers. After Zimbabwe's independence in 1980, this structure was not transformed. The only major change was that independent media could operate. Government control of the public media continued. To this day, both Zimbabwean public and private media operate under stringent laws that regulate media operations (Mpofu, 2017). The media landscape in Zimbabwe remains highly convoluted.

In August 2018, Zimbabwe's Ministry of Information, Publicity and Broadcasting Services held consultative meetings with key media stakeholders to get input into the form and shape of envisaged media policy and law reforms. The government conceded to the unbundling of the discredited Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) through the gazetting of the Freedom of

Information Bill and the Zimbabwe Media Commission Bill. The Broadcasting Services Act was also lined up for similar reconstruction through the Broadcasting Services Amendment Bill. However, "while the government has since gazetted the Freedom of Information Bill and the Zimbabwe Media Commission Bill, it is regrettable that the two Bills were generally viewed as a far cry from meeting the country's constitutional yardsticks as envisaged under Sections 61 and 62 of the constitution which guarantees freedom of expression, media freedom and access to information" (The Independent, 2020: 1).

The Zimbabwean government has since resuscitated the repressive Public Order and Security Act (POSA), albeit under a new name, and the Maintenance of Order and Peace Act (MOPA), but with the retention, if not tightening of POSA's draconian provisions. Inevitably, several journalists are continuously and increasingly caught in the crossfire of the government's crackdowns against constitutionally guaranteed rights to media freedom, freedom of expression, assembly, and association. In this regard, the operational environment and democratic space remained volatile, uncertain, and unpredictable (The Independent, 2020).

The Media Landscape:

Mazango (2005) argues that Zimbabwe's media policy regime is shaped by three phases. The first phase is exemplified by the Rhodesian Front between 1964 and 1979. This phase was characterised by very restrictive communication regulations as the government fought numerous internal and external enemies. The second phase is the post-independence policy redirection of 1980 to 1983 which a triumphant ZANU-PF used to further the Rhodesian experience of media control. The third phase is the restriction of communication spaces to manage challenges to the states' legitimacy by both internal and external enemies of 2000 to 2004. During this period, the ZANU-PF government started facing political and economic challenges and in response created an enhanced information ministry housed in the president's office. The new information ministry would lead a new and invigorated project of media control which aggressively defended state policies. Broadcasting was monopolized to legitimize ZANU-PF's hegemony. The state-owned newspapers were directed to serve government propaganda objectives more patriotically. Strict media laws were introduced to control journalists and the independent press (Mazango, 2005).

In 2001, the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) and the Miscellaneous Offenses Act were passed into law, and they would severely regulate public debate and criticism of the government. In 2002, the situation worsened as the draconian

statute, Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) (2002) was passed into law. AIPPA punitively limits the functions and role of mainstream media and unforgivingly curbs the freedom of expression. In 2004, Zimbabwe's media and speech freedoms deteriorated further by the passing of the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act of 2004. Under this statute, the criticism of President Mugabe by the media, the opposition, and citizens was classified as designed to engender feelings of hatred and undermining the authority of the president in both his personal and official capacity (Moyo, 2011).

The Zimbabwean government did not stop. In 2006, they introduced the Interception of Electronic Communications Bill (2006). This Bill legitimized the monitoring of email correspondence and telephone conversations by the military, intelligence services, police, and the office of the President. Fortunately, the lack of technological capability, manpower and monitoring equipment needed to intercept these communications exhausted these plans (Mutsvairo, 2013). But this did not deter the regime as in 2017 they passed into law the Cybercrime and Cyber-Security Bill of 2017 which will "…. control citizens' activities online, monitor online activities and draw boundaries for internet users as far as access to information and information dissemination is concerned" (ZDI, 2018:1).

However, Alfandika and Akpojivi (2020) argue that the struggle for media reform by media reform activists in Zimbabwe has since revolutionised the media sphere from various perspectives. However, regardless of these changes, the media in Zimbabwe has remained undemocratic. The Media Alliance of Zimbabwe advances media reform activism in the country and is made up of various members namely, the Media Institute of Southern Africa -Zimbabwe (MISA), Zimbabwe National Editors Forum, Zimbabwe Union of Journalist (ZUJ), Federation of African Media Women of Zimbabwe, Media Monitors, Zimbabwe Association of Community Radio Stations (ZACRAS), and the Voluntary Media Council of Zimbabwe (VMCZ). These groups are a key driving force of media reforms for media democracy in Zimbabwe.

Additionally, scholars like Mare offer "practical ways of transforming media institutions in a post-coup Zimbabwe, highlighting the potential for revitalizing the national public sphere, which has been complicit in the normalization and institutionalization of vendetta and war journalism" (2019: 100). The practical ways Mare (2019) offers are such that contemporary Zimbabwe must transform the partisan and propagandistic Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) into a modern public service media. Zimbabwean media also suffers from a chronic 'legal and extra-legal repression.' Therefore, to promote the growth of a healthy public sphere in Zimbabwe, there is a need to reform restrictive laws, such as the

Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA), Broadcasting Services Act, Interception of Communication Act, Public Order and Security Act, and chapter 4 of the constitution (Codification and Reform Act).

Mare (2019) also argues for the creation of a converged regulatory authority to avoid the duplication of responsibilities within the current media and communications sector in Zimbabwe. The current set up creates unnecessary bureaucratic pathologies. Another important intervention Mare (2019) argues for is the newsroom-level transformation where audits are implemented so that journalists with conflicts of interest should recuse themselves from covering certain stories. Mare (2019) calls for the rebuilding of resilient journalism training and education institutions which will offer courses that combine theory with practice. Finally, Mare (2019) calls for the depolarization of the media sector. In Zimbabwe, the public media supports the government and the ruling political party (ZANU-PF) while the private media generally gives opposing perspectives.

In such a restrictive media and free speech environment that has seen most citizens, the opposition, and civic organizations turn to social media. The turn to social media has since ignited the growth and creation of alternative media platforms that are not regulated by the government. The aim of these alternative media is to provide broadcast access to ordinary citizens, protest groups, trade unions, and opposition parties. Ndlela (2010 says that these alternative media are driven by a focused political agenda aimed at democratic reforms in Zimbabwe. These alternative media typically go beyond simply providing a platform for radical or alternative points of view. Hence, Atton (2001) argues that they emphasise the organisation of media to enable wider social participation in their creation, production and dissemination than is possible in the mostly regulated mass media.

The birth of Zimbabwean alternative media spaces:

One of the main complaints from state actors and policy makers about Africa's international image is that the global media do not present the continent's promising indicators and progress to the rest of the world. Instead, Kalyango (2011) advances that the global awareness of Africa which is driven by international media coverage often focuses on war, state collapse, famine, and disease. However, the relationship between African governments and their local media is fragile and conflicted (Wasserman, 2011) as many governments exert strong influence and control over the airwaves. Moreover, governments in the developing world (Gurevitch and Blumler, 2004; McQuail, 2005) tend to argue that the media should support their national and developmental goals even if this

means the restriction of press freedoms. In late 2003, Zimbabwean journalists began to flee from the increasing media suppression and worsening political and economic crisis. In their newfound homes, South Africa, Canada, the UK, and the United States of America (USA), they started building news websites to share information about Zimbabwe (Moyo, 2007).

The news websites were created with the aim of providing alternative viewpoints on the crisis in Zimbabwe as well as to counter the state-controlled media propaganda. These journalists, through their news websites, promised to unearth the truth and expose corruption and the human rights abuses by the Mugabe regime. These news websites successfully played a significant role in scrutinizing the government and exposing corruption (Moyo, 2007). They also contributed to greater transparency and public-sector accountability and were instrumental in unravelling, discussing, and submitting solutions to the socio-political and economic issues that confronted Zimbabwe (Afrobarometer, 2018). These alternative media spaces played a role to raise consciousness about the true state of governance in Zimbabwe and have contributed to the rise of protest culture and cyber-activism.

Cyber-activism and Protest in Zimbabwe:

New communication technologies have become resources for the mobilization of collective action and the subsequent creation, organization, and implementation of social movements around the world (Weist, 2011). Zimbabwe has benefited from these new communication technologies, particularly the marginalised groups found within the country. Many Zimbabwean citizens, opposition political parties, civic organisations, women, and the LGBTIQ (people who have identified themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, or questioning). community have profited from the use of Facebook over the years. Facebook in Africa once grew from 7 million users in 2009 to 17 million users in 2010 (Bohler-Muller and van der Merwe, 2011), since then its growth with that of other forms of social media has been unparalleled. Moreover, the much-celebrated Arab Spring championed social media as an organizing force, and it became an optimistic example to follow given the central role youth played in the revolts (Chiweshe, 2017).

Yet, women's activism has always been policed and supervised by men who are in power, and this has usually excluded them from voicing their issues outside formal politics from which they are also disempowered (Harris, 2008). Nonetheless, the proliferation of the Internet has shown promise and potential of empowering women in ways that are unimaginable in most patriarchal societies.

In Zimbabwe, Fungai Machirori started *Her Zimbabwe*[12] in 2012 after graduating from the University of Reading in the UK. This followed the trend of news sites born in the diaspora that have attempted to advance democratic deliberations in Zimbabwe. *Her Zimbabwe* attempts "to empower women as citizens, giving them a platform to speak on issues otherwise ignored in male-dominated mainstream media and newsrooms or frowned upon by society (Mpofu, 2016: 271). As the name suggests, *Her Zimbabwe* focuses entirely on women's issues giving women, as citizens, a platform to speak and articulate the issues which seem to be ignored by society, industry, policymakers, and the media. The site amplifies women's voices online, stimulates conversations, and promotes literacy in digital storytelling and security. *Her Zimbabwe* is closing the digital access divide through building and strengthening women's online content production skills (Mpofu, 2016). Nevertheless, *Her Zimbabwe* has since been officially closed as of June 2018.

Another marginalized and rarely discussed Zimbabwean group is the LGBTIQ community. Their activism has seen them use social media, particularly Facebook, in a country where "queer gender and sexuality is largely condemned in the mainstream heterosexual Zimbabwean media and culture" (Mhiripiri and Moyo 2016: 249). The queer community largely represented by the Gays and Lesbians Association of Zimbabwe (GALZ) also represents a social movement that has struggled to put its issues in the public sphere. GALZ struggles to publish their ideas in the mainstream media because their national ban automatically means that they are banned on national radio and television. Given the dominance of homophobia in the mainstream media, social media offers them an alternative discursive space. Facebook provides a communicative space for alternative information, debate, and discussions. However, social media is also congested and intruded upon by traditional homophobic elements. Homophobes tend to abuse the spaces by posting outright insults or other dehumanizing and denigrating material with sarcastic and distasteful comments. Thus, the GALZ Facebook page tries to offer a safe, alternative space for discussion and debate for the Zimbabwean queer community (Mhiripiri and Moyo, 2016).

In politics, ahead of Zimbabwe's 2013 elections the emergence of Baba Jukwa on Facebook "evoked euphoric expectations about the possibility of the Zimbabwean Winter" (Mare, 2016: 52). These euphoric expectations were not misplaced as the Baba Jukwa Facebook page was created two years after the start of the Arab Spring uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. Zimbabwean citizens just like the cyber-

[12] Her Zimbabwe is an initiative founded in 2012 harnessing the potential of digital media to share and tell women's stories in the fight against gender discrimination in the Zimbabwean society.

optimists Diamond (2010), Papacharissi (2010) and Shirky (2011) excitedly acknowledged and embraced social media's revolutionary and democratizing potential in ways that resonated with technological deterministic discourses. Here, the new media technologies are viewed as enabling social movement actors to report news, expose wrongdoing, express opinions, mobilize protest and monitor elections. Social media are also touted as spawning new repertoires of collective action like connective action at the local, national, and transnational level (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Castells, 2012). Baba Jukwa fulfilled these roles for the wider Zimbabwean society. International media likened Baba Jukwa to Julian Assange and Andrew Snowden who advocated for free speech and transparency by disclosing official state secrets (Mare, 2016).

The page was created three months before the 2013 elections, and it generated massive digital enthusiasm, which according to González-Bailón et al (2011), provided evidence of the extent to which online networks can help challenge the competitive advantage of traditional players. Mare (2016) even argues that the page also managed to plug the gap left by the waning investigative journalism and the withdrawal of social movements from the contentious Zimbabwean politics. Moreover, "besides acting as a channel of citizen journalism, Baba Jukwa symbolized a cyber-movement with no physical meetings, but which made use of a whole gamut of technologies within the wider communicative ecology" (Mare, 2016: 64). The comments section on Baba Jukwa's posts became a site for dissent, protest, and activism for Zimbabwean citizens both outside of and on Facebook as they became the preferred sources of news. The latitude of communications which was previously unavailable to citizens through state media expanded through the political deliberations of Zimbabweans on Baba Jukwa's Facebook page. The page managed to invoke debate on issues that citizens would otherwise dare not speak about given the legislative and political restraints to freedom of expression.

The digital storytelling technique by Baba Jukwa was encouraging as no one before him had gained such momentum by using new media methods to challenge and oppose the Mugabe administration. Baba Jukwa was successful in attracting citizens to openly discuss politically sensitive issues and these actions had potential to benefit the country's democratic space in the long term (Mutsvairo and Sirks, 2015).

Zimbabwe's democratic space did not have to wait for long to benefit from Baba Jukwa's brazenness in using Facebook for protesting the government. In 2016, the country experienced widespread and recurrent citizen protests targeting the Mugabe regime. A youthful cleric, Pastor Evan Mawarire, triggered these protests

by using social media to post a video questioning the meanings attached to the national flag considering the protracted socio-economic and political challenges confronting the country, this led to the formation of the #ThisFlag movement. Unemployed university graduates disgruntled by the government's failure to create jobs in turn formed the #ThisGown movement. While the #ThisFlag movement started through social media as an online movement, it quickly morphed into physical street action after Pastor Mawarire challenged the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (RBZ) governor, John Mangundya, for a public debate on the controversial proposal to introduce an unpopular surrogate currency called bond notes. Thousands of people turned up for this public meeting at the RBZ headquarters in Harare to engage with the governor, only 250 were allowed into the venue. For the #ThisFlag movement, this meeting marked the beginning of a transition from the cyberspace to physical space (Gukurume, 2017).

At the centre of the #ThisGown and #ThisFlag movements were several youthful participants as both movements were initiated by the youth. This was largely in part because many youths in Zimbabwe are marginalised from the economy and national politics (Mutukura, 2019). The actions initiated by the youth were not unique to Zimbabwe as youth across Africa are at the forefront of most protest actions. For example, Ben Ali who ruled Tunisia for 20 years, Mubarak who reigned in Egypt for 30 years, and Gaddafi who held Libya in a tight grip for 40 years were all ultimately challenged by 20–30-year-olds who initiated and sustained protests leading to their downfall (Howard and Parks, 2012).

#ThisFlag's landmark activity, which brought social media movements into the limelight, was the national stay away on 6 July 2016. Pastor Mawarire felt that the Zimbabwean government was not taking the citizens' grievances seriously. Thus, he started calling for a national stay away which was summarily dubbed, 'Shutdown Zimbabwe' and #ShutdownZimbabwe on social media. On the 6th of July 2016 citizens did not go to work and those who ran businesses did not open their shops heeding the pastor's call for a national stay away. State media reported that it was business as usual, although the reality on the ground through the pictures and videos that circulated on WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook showed the exact opposite (Gukurume, 2017).

Recently, it has been reported that Zimbabwe's independent media are turning to WhatsApp as a primary distributor of news as the information landscape is shifting to social platforms. WhatsApp is filling the void that both independent and mainstream state-controlled media is not able to fill in terms of distributing alternative views on issues and policies. To put the importance of WhatsApp into perspective, the platforms connections comprise almost half of all Internet usage

in Zimbabwe which has an estimated population of 16.7 million people. The mobile phone penetration rate is estimated to be almost 100% with an Internet penetration rate of approximately 50% (Thomas, 2019).

Conclusion:

RSF (2019) advances that authoritarian regimes continue to tighten their grip on the media and there is a continued decline in the number of countries where journalists can work in complete security. This leaves social media with a unique opportunity to plug the gap. Lately, citizens around the world are now monitoring these new media sites to supplement their limited knowledge of any events anywhere on the planet (Aday et al, 2012). In Zimbabwe, the power of social media as a tool for protest and activism has become more pronounced as exemplified by how Baba Jukwa, GALZ, *Her Zimbabwe*, #ThisGown, and #ThisFlag have used the internet. Citizens now have more opportunities to freely participate, talk back, be heard, and to debate on social media platforms. The overwhelming popularity of the #ThisFlag movement shows that social media plays a fundamental role in mobilising political action and creating networked transnational publics (Benkler, 2006). #ThisFlag reinvigorated and revolutionised the political consciousness and activism of Zimbabweans and represented a massive re-awakening of the masses after a long period of dormancy (Gukurume, 2017).

In addition, Chitanana (2020) contends that the use of physical violence and intimidation to curb opposition momentum and to preserve the pre-millennium status quo. The throttling of political space and free expression which has coincided with the growth of information technologies, has helped facilitate a surge in Zimbabwe's digitally mediated dissent. Thus, Chitanana observes that "(1) The prevailing political environment and related factors, amidst growing digital technology platform growth in Zimbabwe, has necessitated activist groups' appropriation of available technologies to circumvent a narrowing civic space and to challenge the status quo; (2) In adopting these technological platforms, the activist groups have structurally transformed and; (3) While technology platforms have contributed to dynamic activism, the efficacy and impact off-line of digital advocacy remains constrained by inherent limitations (e.g. digital divide, repression)" (2020: 131).

However, despite Zimbabwe's slow democratic transition and the state's violent response to protest, there is a growing social movement challenging the status quo. Chitanana (2020) argues that combined with other socio-economic conditions in Zimbabwe, social media technologies are helping activists and ordinary citizens in calling their government to account and offering opportunity

for self-organization outside the traditional party politics or structured social movements. In the last two decades these digital activism platforms have gradually created opportunities for ordinary citizens to challenge the status quo and to actively demand change in a restrictive socio-political context with varying successes.

In this chapter, Zimbabwe's political background has been presented, as it shapes the present electoral and media landscape. The conditions attached to these contexts – the political, electoral and media – have created a mushrooming cyber-activist ethos which is challenging the hegemonic nature of ZANU-PF.

In the next chapter, literature which frames the scholarship around the influential nature of social media with respect to democratization processes, is reviewed to provide further context to the present study.

CHAPTER 3.

Literature Review.

Introduction:

This chapter presents an organized review of literature which examines previous seminal works on the impact of social media on democracy. The works reviewed in this chapter are considered relevant especially to this present study. As a starting point, the role of the internet in Africa is hailed as a key aspect of the continent's use of social media in matters of governance.

Jha and Kodila-Tedika (2020) even argue that the internet has positively influenced the capability of citizens to communicate information to governments. The internet, particularly via its associated social media platforms, has provided a means of multi-way communication which was previously missing. Most authoritarian regimes also managed to sustain control partly due to the preservation of one-way communication where they manipulated the flow of information to the masses (Gainous et al, 2018). Hence, one of the finest benefits of multi-way communication is that it has been much harder to control than the one-way communication allowed by legacy media – newspapers, radios, and televisions. The successes of authoritarian systems in controlling legacy media are now being reversed with the growth of social media. Interactive platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp among others have become critical for the unobstructed political participation by the public. Although this participation is highly favoured by democratic doctrines, these platforms are also "increasingly used to target specific individuals in ways that often belie appropriate conduct and can amount to "trolling": posting inflammatory messages directly to other users to provoke an equally reactionary response" (Duncombe, 2019: 409). Furthermore, social media act as "an accelerant, and an at-scale content platform and distribution channel, for both viral "dis"-information (the deliberate creation and sharing of information known to be false) and "mis" information (the inadvertent sharing of false information)" (Deb et al, 2017: 4). These two types of content which are created and disseminated by both state and private actors by using bots in most cases pose distinct threats to and for public dialogue. They flood the public with multiple, competing realities and worsen the lack of agreement about what constitutes truth, facts, and evidence.

Deb et al (2017) also argue that the platform design of social media in combination of partisan media in traditional channels, has exacerbated political divisions and polarization. Moreover, some social media algorithms reinforce divisions and create echo chambers that perpetuate increasingly extreme or biased views over

time. These social media algorithms also convert popularity into legitimacy, overwhelming the public with multiple, conflicting assertions. Deb et al also put forward the notion that "populist leaders also use social media platforms with the aid of trolls and bots, to subvert established protocol, shut down dissent, marginalize minority voices, project soft power across borders, normalize hateful views, showcase false momentum for their views, or create the impression of tacit approval of their appeals to extremism" (2017: 4). Additionally, social media platforms have become the preferred channels for advertising spend thus they widen the gap between the interests of publishers and journalists and erode traditional news organizations' revenues.

Dawood (2020) also reinforces that the rise of social media has brought renewed attention to a profound dilemma confronting democratic theory and practice. "On the one hand, social media allows for new and accessible forms of speech, persuasion, and association, thereby strengthening the discourse that lies at the heart of a democratic system of government. On the other hand, social media gives rise to a host of ills, including fake news, polarization, echo chambers, extremism, radicalization, and fragmentation, which undermines the long-term health of democracy" (Dawood, 2020: 640).

Consequentially, the fundamental principles underlying democracy (trust, informed dialogue, a shared sense of reality, mutual consent, and participation) are tested by certain features and attributes of social media. Therefore, this chapter builds on the literature that corroborates the notions around the influence of social media on democracy.

The widespread availability of political information on social media has a bearing on how citizens now mobilize and participate in politics. This accessibility is indispensable for improving citizens' knowledge of current events leading them to making smarter political choices to their advantage. In countries were the freedom to communicate and organize is absent, social media has become a space to openly deliberate political and social issues (Ferrara, 2020). However, the use of social media for news is not only limited to this purposeful consumption. Lee and Xenos (2019) advance that social media also facilitates incidental exposure to political content when using social media for other purposes. Therefore, "considering both purposeful consumption and incidental exposure to news, it seems obvious that social media provides more opportunities for citizens to encounter political information than ever before" (Lee and Xenos, 2019: 18).

As more opportunities for citizens to encounter political information surge, those whose voices are marginalised are presented with an opportunity to be heard.

Social media give these politically marginalized publics new means of holding governments accountable and for pressing for wider political inclusion. Similarly, "social media can obviously amplify other and more extreme voices as well, including those which, from the point of view of liberal democracy, are antisystem" (Tucker et al, 2017: 47).

In Zimbabwe, numerous studies (e.g., Chibuwe, 2020; Chitanana and Mutsvairo, 2019; Gukurume, 2017; Mare, 2018; Mutanana, 2017; Mutsvairo, 2018; and Sabao and Chikara, 2020) have identified that social media have influenced political participation and mobilization. However, little attention has been paid to whether these platforms can maximise their potential and achieve tangible democratic objectives and this chapter will address this oft omitted assessment. The chapter starts by mapping the global impact of social media on elections with an emphasis on those that have occurred in Africa. The individual effects of social media platforms – Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp groups – to democracy is also reviewed particularly in relation to political participation, education, and mobilization.

Social Media and Elections:

Internet penetration and access to smartphones is increasingly expanding and a growing share of voters are now receiving information about politics via Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and a range of digital messaging platforms. These social media platforms are now enabling citizens to report news, expose wrongdoing, express opinions, mobilize protest, monitor elections, scrutinize government, deepen participation, and expand the horizons of freedom (Diamond, 2010).

During elections, social media have become commonplace in political campaigns globally (Xenos et al, 2017). In fact, political campaigning on social media is now a core feature of contemporary democracy (Bright et al, 2020), because they are relatively low cost and easy to use, and they enable the bypassing of traditional media (Lo et al, 2019) to offer direct contact a targeted audience. In Africa, these platforms are reshaping most of the political communication with political parties and candidates changing the way they campaign for public office.

Social media's influence has extended to how politicians now; raise funds, mobilize support, establish, and maintain political relationships with their constituencies, and even how they attack their adversaries (Ndlela and Mano, 2020). Furthermore, political parties, candidates, commentators, and citizens take to social media in unmatched ways to contribute their thoughts on key issues particularly during election periods. This use of social media, among many others, has led to "many rightly arguing that social media is crucial for free and fair

elections" (Ndlela and Mano, 2020: 8). Yet, social media can still be captured and manipulated by those with vested interests to subvert electoral systems and undermine the integrity of elections and democracy. Political incumbents can use their financial influence to employ the use of automated systems like bots to disrupt dialogues in social spaces. Thus, "the digital environment has also given rise to more potent forms of fake news, information distortions and below-the-belt campaigning methods that are undermining electoral democracy in Africa" (Ndlela and Mano, 2020: 9).

Social networking bots are sets of algorithms that take on the duties of repetitive sets of instructions to establish a service among social media users. And the algorithms – ubiquitous and pervasive – are "encoded procedures for transforming input data into a desired output, based on specified calculations" (Gillespie, 2014: 167). Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube and lately TikTok[13] among others have an enormous influence in the creation, dissemination, and consumption of political content. Additionally, these platforms collect more and more data about their users; what they do online, post, share, read, like, forward, their keystrokes, movements, locations, check-ins, and interests. These platforms 'collate virtually every aspect of everyday life.' Consequentially, algorithms play a major role in the dissemination of information and news on elections. Accordingly, Ndlela (2020) argues that Facebook and Twitter algorithms indicate that social media infrastructure influences the movement of political information to users through recommendations and news feeds.

Facebook's algorithms determine what is displayed in a user's News Feed. If you have an object in the News Feed (e.g., status update), whenever another user interacts with that object, they are creating what Facebook calls an Edge. An Edge includes actions like tags, likes, and comments. There are three different components in a Facebook algorithm.

1. The affinity score between the viewing user and the item's creator – interacting with friends often by checking their profile and sending messages will give you a higher affinity score for that friend, than with other friends whom you have lesser interactions with.

[13] TikTok is a Chinese video-sharing social networking service founded in 2012 by Zhang Yiming. It is used to create short music, lip-sync, dance, comedy and talent videos of 3 to 15 seconds, and short looping videos of 3 to 60 seconds.

2. The weight given to each type of Edge – this depends on what Facebook considers to be important; for example, giving a comment has more weight than a Like.
3. The time factor, whereby the older the Edge, the less important it becomes.

Nevertheless, Facebook's algorithms continue to evolve due to several factors, including regulatory and data protection issues (Ndlela, 2020: 17).

On Twitter, several changes have been made to the platform's algorithm since the application's launch in 2006. The Twitter algorithm analyses and presents Twitter posts that it assumes that users want to see. It also assesses the tweets from every person or organization a user follows, and it then assigns scores based on a range of other factors built around the tweet itself, the tweet's author, and the user. These changes ensure that the most popular tweets are far more widely seen enabling them to go viral on an unprecedented scale (Ndlela, 2020). However, the changes risk further insulating Twitter users from people whose viewpoints run counter to their own leading to polarization of the electorate. Gillespie (2011) also reasons that, algorithms are not neutral as they encode political choices and frame information in other ways. Despite these deficiencies, the provision and availability of information, communication and engagements between political parties and electorates via social media remains an essential part of the democratic process (Boateng, 2020). Thus, in the following sections an in-depth discussion of this crucial relationship between social media platforms – Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp – and their relationship with electoral processes is presented. However, before that we must also consider how elections and electoral processes can be protected from social media manipulation.

Protecting Elections from Social Media Manipulation:

Aral and Eckles (2019) advance that the range of disagreement among experts reveal a fractured state of research and evidence to what extent democratic elections are vulnerable to social media manipulation. Therefore, they then propose a 4-step plan for fighting the manipulation of elections using social media. The first step is to 'catalogue exposures to manipulation' which they define as the "impressions (i.e., serving of an ad or message to a viewer) of paid and organic manipulative content (e.g., false content intended to deceive voters, or even true content propagated by foreign actors, who are banned from participating in domestic political processes, with the intent of manipulating voters)" (Aral and Eckles, 2019: 859). Here, they propose that we must evaluate the reach of manipulation campaigns and analyse the targeting strategies that distribute these impressions. Therefore, to defend against manipulation

researchers need to index a variety of social media information where the content of messages, images, and texts on social media are analysed to measure effectiveness. Aral and Eckles' (2019) second step is to combine exposure and voting behaviour dataset. Previously, public voting records and social media accounts were compared using self-reported profile information, but this can now be improved by using location data which is already being collected by social media companies.

Aral and Eckles (2019) argue for the assessment of the effectiveness of manipulative messages on opinions and behaviour as a third step. Their core argument is that in studying voter behaviour, the results are not always accurate enough to answer questions. Therefore, in pursuing credibility in the estimation of the effects of misinformation on changes in opinions and behaviours, they propose a change in approach. This is done by analysing similar people exposed to varying levels of misinformation. Thus, Aral and Eckles (2019) propose that since social media companies already run algorithm tests these same tests could be used to measure exposure effects. The fourth and final step is that we must calculate the consequences of voting behaviour changes. Thus, Aral and Eckles (2019) contend that measures like predicted voter behaviour (with or without exposure to misinformation) should be combined with data like geographic and demographic characteristics for a particular election. This would help with vote total estimates in a particular area.

In proposing the four steps, Aral and Eckles (2019) highlight that they do not unconditionally advocate for the use of all existing data for their projected analyses. Instead, they argue that "privacy-preserving methods for record linkage and content analysis, such as differential privacy, could help manage trade-offs between the need for privacy and the need to protect democracy" (Aral and Eckles, 2019: 861).

Facebook and Elections:

The question of how social media and digital technologies are shaping elections in today's political environment is controversial (Cheeseman et al, 2020). Yu and Oh (2018) assert that the ascent of social media use has enabled democratic citizenship models to shift from informed citizenship to expressive citizenship. Traditional concepts of citizenship tend to look to news consumption from mainstream media sources as the primary means through which individuals gain civic awareness and engage in politics. However, with increased social media use in social and personal interests within peer-to-peer networks, nascent political behaviours are likely to be triggered according to Yu and Oh (2018). Additionally,

"the relative ease of creating and disseminating social media content is broadening political communication and giving rise to new ways of civic participation and agency in electoral politics, before, during or after elections" (Mano, 2020: 61).

Thus, Facebook has set out research projects which seek to investigate social media's impact on democracy. They have provided researchers with data from the platform's Application Programming Interface (API), its Ad Library, and an anonymized Uniform Resource Locater (URL) dataset (Kelly, 2019). By doing so, Facebook projected that this initiative would deepen the understanding of the role of social media on elections and democracy. In turn, this would also help them, and other social media companies improve their products and practices.

However, it has been known since at least 2012 that, Facebook is a powerful and non-neutral force in electoral politics (Madrigal, 2017) made possible by the platforms' allure – its ability to give you what you want. "Like a page, get more of that page's posts; like a story, get more stories like that; interact with a person, get more of their updates. The way Facebook determines the ranking of the News Feed is the probability that you will like, comment on, or share a story. Shares are worth more than comments, which are both worth more than likes, but in all cases, the more likely you are to interact with a post, the higher up it will show in your News Feed" (Madrigal, 2017: 1).

Hargreaves et al (2018) further add that the Facebook News Feed personalization algorithm has a significant impact on the lifestyle, mood, and opinion of millions of Facebook users. The conduct of this algorithm lacks transparency, motivating measurements, modelling, and analysis to understand and improve its properties. Additionally, the algorithm influences users that are usually unaware of its impact by creating a filter bubble that reinforces the perceived users' opinions (Hargreaves et al, 2018). As such, the algorithm shapes the way political discourse is understood. This has potential to create biases towards sources and ultimately affect how democracy works.

Nevertheless, others (Masiha et al, 2018) insist that there is a positive use of Facebook as it motivates people to politically engage online. Here, online political participation becomes a precursor for offline political participation. Thus, the main argument by Masiha et al (2018) is that Facebook facilitates engagement in political activities especially by youth. This was previously not possible. The African experience is such that the identification of the youth constituency as demographically superior compared to other age cohorts has increased the use of Facebook for political mobilization during electoral periods (Mare, 2018). In

America, Facebook's *'I Voted*" button in 2012 drove a small but measurable increase in voter turnout, primarily among young people (Madrigal, 2017).

Because of a large youth population in Africa, Facebook has remained the most popular and pervasive social media platform in the continent. This has also meant that Facebooks' capacity to manipulate public opinion online has grown (Fernandez Gibaja, 2020). In 2019, Facebook's Head of Cybersecurity Policy, Nathaniel Gleicher, said that they removed 265 Facebook and Instagram accounts, Facebook Pages, Groups, and events involved in coordinated inauthentic behaviour. These actions were related to election processes in Nigeria, Senegal, Togo, Angola, Niger, and Tunisia and originated from Israel. Gleicher (2019) stated that the people behind this coordinated and inauthentic behaviour used fake accounts to run Pages, disseminate content, and artificially increase engagement. They also represented themselves as locals, including local news organizations, and published alleged leaked information about politicians. The Page administrators and account owners frequently posted about political news especially on elections topics in various countries, candidate views, and criticism of political opponents.

In Nigeria, these fake Facebook accounts attempted to influence the country's elections. The fake Facebook accounts posed as Nigerians, Nigerian news organizations who then published information about politicians which was allegedly leaked. The political news, candidate views, and criticism of political opponents all had one clear goal – the re-election of the incumbent President, Muhammadu Buhari. One of the fake Pages was filled with viral misinformation praising incumbent President Muhammadu Buhari, and attacking Atiku Abubakar, the former Nigerian vice president and Buhari's main political rival in the February 2019 elections (Vota, 2019).

As Facebook continues to be used for dishonest means such as influencing electoral outcomes, its one key advantage – the capacity to facilitate political discussions – remains undisputed. This is because Facebooks' other extensions such as its Pages also constitute a realization and an extension of the original public sphere (Bosch et al, 2020). Here, Facebook Pages and Groups facilitate the expression of diverse political views including minority and marginalized views.

Another social media application that has successfully mirrored Facebooks' feat is Twitter which has also increased the speed, scope, and scale of political engagement amongst politicians, supporters, and opponents. In Zimbabwe, an authoritarian state with highly regulated mainstream media, Munoriyarwa and Chambwera (2020) stress that Twitter has changed the patterns of civic and

political engagement. The platform has become common for political activism, organising protests, and sharing political news and resources. However, in the sharing of these resources disinformation is also distributed at a rapid rate.

Bradshaw and Howard (2018) contend that social media has emerged as a powerful tool for political engagement and expression. Thus, Chadwick and Vaccari (2019) assert that in today's media systems, large numbers of ordinary citizens are circulating political information with great regularity. This has led to state actors "increasingly leveraging these platforms to spread computational propaganda and disinformation during critical moments of public life. These actions serve to nudge public opinion, set political or media agendas, censor freedom of speech, or control the flow of information online" (Bradshaw and Howard, 2018:23).

The manipulation of public opinion via social media platforms is emerging as a critical issue facing contemporary digital society and there are many dimensions to this challenge. Amid a global pandemic triggered by the novel coronavirus of 2019 (COVID-19) the one major consequence of the massive amount of information being shared via social media is the difficulty of filtering information. "As the sheer volume of social media information rises, the signal-to-noise ratio lowers, and it can become difficult to identify factual and pertinent information" (Gottlieb and Dyer, 2020: 640). Shu et al (2020) state that to combat fake news, some social media outlets turn to users to flag potential fake news articles. For instance, Facebook recently introduced tools that help users to flag articles that they deem as fake (Tschiatschek et al, 2018).

Additionally, social media allows for virtual celebrities and influencers (both medical and non-medical) to have a significant influence on information spread due to their number of followers, regardless of the accuracy of their information. This leads to the rapid spread of incorrect information and significant potential for harm. Gottlieb and Dyer (2020) argue that this is challenging for the public since a wide array of physicians appear on social media sites occasionally proposing strategies that conflict with recommended care.

Twitter and Elections:

Social media, such as Facebook and Twitter among others, have recently become essential tools for political campaigning. During elections, Twitter has become a place where "those in the know and those who want to know meet to exchange gossip, commentary, links to news updates and press releases, and photos of the gathering media throng" (Bruns and Burgess, 2015: 14). The use of Twitter hashtags has also become central in mobilising like-minded, "individuals and

setting the agenda for established international mass media that spread images, messages and insights" (Berenger, 2013: 512). However, Facebook retains major influence in elections, with Liberini et al (2020) arguing that micro-targeted political ads on Facebook are prevalent during polls and this has significant effect on voter behaviour, particularly among users who are targeted based on ethnicity, gender, location, and political orientation. Political advertising on Facebook exacerbates political polarization as "highly targeted users of the platform are less likely to change their minds compared to less-targeted users" (Liberini et al, 2020: 29).

Modern politics is in a state of crisis and the increased gap between politicians and citizens is widening. We are now experiencing a democratic dearth caused by this chasm due to a communication deficit. Politicians now mostly use spin doctors and campaign strategists to communicate with the electorate resulting in legislators losing touch with those they represent (Vergeer, 2015). However, Twitter appears to solve this problem as it has potential to disrupt normative political behaviour and communication. Moreover, politicians now use the platform to maintain political relationships with their constituents. This has also led to Twitter becoming popular during electoral processes as candidates, political parties, and citizens increasingly use the application for political deliberations. As Twitter political discussions on are embedded within other more routine activities, McGregor and Mourao (2016) argue that this leads to better quality political discourse.

In Western democracies, Twitter has since emerged as a dominant political communication and campaign tool. But Ahmed et al (2016) advance that in economically developing countries with low Internet penetration Twitter's role in politics is largely unknown. Therefore, in conducting this study the aim is to contribute to this dearth of knowledge about the influence of social media in African democracies. In 2018, a report by Portland Communications – *How Africa Tweets* – indicates that more and more conversations around elections are occurring on social media, particularly Twitter. The scope of the report was to identify and analyse who was shaping African Twitter conversations during elections. The report reviewed ten African elections that occurred between 2017 and 2018 in Lesotho, Senegal, Rwanda, Kenya (2 elections), Angola, Liberia, Equatorial Guinea, Somaliland, and Egypt.

One of the key findings was that bots were active in these elections especially in Kenya where they accounted for a quarter of the influential voices. Across all elections, bots served primarily to agitate, pushing negative narratives about major issues, candidates, and perceived electoral abnormalities. Another key

finding underlined that, politicians had a limited role in driving conversations, instead local journalists and news outlets had a greater influence. In Kenya, the number of politicians influencing the discourse on Twitter doubled between the first and second election, but still failed to reach ten per cent. In Senegal, no politicians were identified among influential Twitter handles. Rwanda had the highest number of influential politicians and governmental organisations with 1 in every 3 influential Twitter handle driving electoral dialog (Portland Communications, 2018). Despite the pervasiveness of bots, the report found a high prevalence of political and electoral conversations on Twitter around the ten elections.

In Zimbabwe's 2018 elections, Twitter became an ideal public sphere where netizens engaged in the exchange of information and debates. This was significant because for the longest time Zimbabwean authorities have sought to constrict spaces for public discussion. Zimbabwean citizens also converged on Twitter to discuss politics without the fear of physical harm. Hence, "it is probably reasonable to take an optimistic view of social media as a public sphere in Zimbabwe because other spaces are prone to harsher consequences" (Munoriyarwa and Chambwera, 2020: 82).

Despite these optimistic views about Twitter, the platform remains a fertile space for disinformation campaigns that target elections. The Russian group that interfered in the USA 2016 presidential election has again started using a network of fake accounts to target the upcoming November 2020 elections (Frenkel and Barnes, 2020). Alaimo (2020) argues that the recent hacking of over 130 Twitter accounts of prominent people, including Joe Biden, Barack Obama, Bill Gates, and Elon Musk points to trouble for the November 2020 election. "The incident revealed that, four years after Americans learned how easily an election can be manipulated via social media, the country is still not close to safeguarding the 2020 election" (Alaimo, 2020: 1). In Africa, the use of bots, disinformation campaigns and the spread of fake news on Twitter is also gaining ground.

In Nigeria, Egbunike (2019) says that social media has a history of enabling ethnocentric disinformation and propaganda during elections. During the elections in 2015, Nigerian Twitter "descended into a bitter and binary sparring match between supporters of the then-two major contestants, Goodluck Jonathan (PDP, an Ijaw Christian) and Muhammadu Buhari (APC, a Hausa, Fulani Muslim). Twitter became a tool for propagating ethnic hate and party politics" (Egbunike, 2019: 1). The elections in 2019 were not spared the ethnocentric disinformation and propaganda seen in 2015. As a lasting remedy, Chiefe (2019) posits that Twitter's recent move to ban political advertising could help reduce the problem

of Nigeria's Twitter users getting combative online, especially when political lines are drawn, and alliances questioned.

In sum, as Internet penetration rates increase and access to smartphones expand across Africa, more and more citizens are becoming politically literate. One such social media application that has increased much of African citizens' political consciousness has been WhatsApp Messenger and by extension WhatsApp Groups.

WhatsApp Messenger (Groups) and Elections:

WhatsApp "has become the default mode of telecommunication, especially in urban areas" (Cheeseman et al, 2020: 145) across Africa. The platform has grown in centrality to both everyday life and political communication to the extent that diverse countries such as Brazil, Nigeria, and India have since witnessed their first 'WhatsApp elections' (Cheeseman et al, 2020). India's 2019 general election is generally thought to be the first ever WhatsApp election as more than 400 million of the 460 million people online were said to be WhatsApp during the elections. Millions of Indians considered WhatsApp groups as their primary sources of electoral information making the use of the application ubiquitous (Bengani, 2019).

India faces information wars of an unprecedented nature and scale as they are bombarded with fake news and divisive propaganda on a near-constant basis from a wide range of sources, from television news to global platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp (Poonam and Bansal, 2019). Ahead of the national elections in 2019, India's political parties poured money into creating hundreds of thousands of WhatsApp groups meant to spread political messages and memes. Each group contained a maximum of 256 members and therefore the group chats could theoretically reach more than 700 million people out of India's population of 1.3 billion. The political messages and memes in the group chats frequently contained and disseminated false information and hateful rhetoric, much of which came from forwarded messages (Perrigo, 2019). All this fake news and divisive propaganda are all manufactured in the country by political parties with nationwide cyber-armies. This is unlike in the USA where the focus is on foreign-backed misinformation campaigns which are shaping the outcomes of elections and public discourse.

India's misinformation campaigns have disastrous consequences as these campaigns do not only target political opponents. Poonam and Bansal (2019) say that religious minorities and dissenting individuals are often affected as much of the shared propaganda is rooted in domestic divisions and prejudices. This makes

the consequences of such distortions extreme, from death threats to actual murders which are encouraged by nothing more than rumours sent over WhatsApp Groups.

In Brazil's case, a fringe congressman, Jair Bolsonaro was elected president despite his radical rhetoric. Bolsonaro's electoral success was due to his campaign building a specific communication strategy that used Internet platforms to communicate directly with different groups of voters. Evangelista and Bruno (2019) posit that Bolsonaro used WhatsApp chat groups in micro-targeting and misinforming different groups of voters. Abdin (2019) puts forward that when Brazil emerged from its 20-year rule under military leadership and transitioned into democracy it maintained many of the regime's authoritarian qualities. One of the main inheritances was legacy media which is very much like Zimbabwe which also inherited the same after attaining independence in 1980. Although 75% of Brazil's population uses television to view news, 66% of the population is online which supports Abdin's (2019) assertion that these circumstances helped Bolsonaro to win the election. The election campaigns turned into online battlegrounds which were characterized by the spread of fake news flowing into the other social media platforms from WhatsApp groups. The election candidates even started inflating their campaigns' social media presence by using bots. This eventually led to an intervention by Facebook and WhatsApp which banned more than 100 000 WhatsApp accounts in Brazil (do Nascimento Silva and Silva, 2019).

In Africa, Cheeseman et al (2020) argue that WhatsApp has had an uneven impact on democracy. Although WhatsApp has presented new opportunities for some historically marginalized groups, it has also raised the risk of political instability as it effective in the dissemination of fake news. In Nigeria, WhatsApp comprehensively played a critical role in the spread of fake news and disinformation during the elections in 2019. The major fake news spread during that period was the rumour that President Muhammadu Buhari had died. Upon death he had then been replaced by a Sudanese body double named Jubril. This rumour spread rapidly across WhatsApp and reached other mainstream platforms which prompted Buhari to address it directly (Hitchen et al, 2019). Thus, the platform is also referred to as a disruptive technology that has the potential to be both emancipatory and destructive. As a disruptive technology, WhatsApp operates as a liberation technology and contributes to political turmoil at the same time. Therefore, in elections WhatsApp is likely "to strengthen democracy, by equalizing access to information and facilitating the coordination of opposition and civil society efforts, and to challenge it, by undermining public trust in politicians and the wider political process" (Cheeseman et al, 2020: 156).

Nevertheless, across African elections, WhatsApp has helped to amplify the voices of constituencies that have long been marginalised in political deliberations. The platform has also enabled women to increase their participation in political discussions, especially in more conservative communities. The platform has also become a crucial tool for electoral monitoring and accountability. WhatsApp also offers "opposition candidates a more level playing field when it comes to access to, and distribution of, information, and gives youthful political activists an opportunity to enter and influence politics in a system often closed to those without wealth and extensive, elite networks" (Hitchen et al, 2019: 7).

WhatsApp remains a powerful tool for campaigners in African elections with approximately 17.3% of African citizens using it. However, this figure does not do justice to the impact of WhatsApp (Murphy and Burns, n.d.). The dominant traditional news sources like newspapers and radio and television broadcasts lack credibility. This means that most citizens rely almost exclusively on their personal networks for their news as they understandably prefer to invest trust in their friends and community leaders. The sharing of information here is executed via WhatsApp groups. Hence, Murphy and Burns (2020) posit that should WhatsApp be used in a structured way to positively engage communities and voters. The platform has potential to have an enormously transformative influence on democratic involvement across Africa. Furthermore, WhatsApp's end-to-end encryption sees it being favoured by activists, opposition parties and civil society groups. The end-to-end encryption function makes it possible for activists – political and otherwise – to organise and mobilize for their causes. Thus, the multimodal affordances of social media platforms revive optimism that social movements can increase their visibility and efficacy through social media activism. Freelon et al also theorize that "digital media are critical for contemporary activism – even low-effort "clicktivism" is politically consequential and contributes to offline participation" (2020: 1).

Recently, many users who are concerned about Facebook's data monetization plans have turned to alternative messaging applications such as Telegram which was launched in August 2013. Telegram combines aspects of social networking with secure messaging and has a vocal commitment to user privacy and freedom of expression (Marechal, 2018). With WhatsApp – which is Facebook owned – proposing a new privacy policy update that will "allow WhatsApp to share "some" user data with parent firm Facebook" (Singh, 2021) many are considering moving to Telegram and or Signal. In India, which is WhatsApp's biggest market, as many as almost 80% Indians are considering moving to Telegram or Signal.

Signal is a free cross-platform messaging app that uses end-to-end encryption to keep your messages private (Signal, 2021). Signal is "favoured by tech giants, cybersecurity experts, journalists, government officials, and many more, Signal has gone from a darling secret of the security community to something even the non-tech savvy are using" (McCall, 2020: 1). However, Newton (2021) argues that Signal's rapid growth has also been a cause for concern. Employees are raising questions about the development and addition of new features that they fear will lead to the platform being used in harmful ways. These employees worry that, "should Signal fail to build policies and enforcement mechanisms to identify and remove bad actors, the fallout could bring more negative attention to encryption technologies from regulators at a time when their existence is threatened around the world" (Newton, 2021: 1).

Overview of how selected African countries use social media for democracy:

In much of Africa, Mano (2020) says that mainstream media is captured by commercial and political interests which limits the space for citizens to communicate. Thus, social media has provided an important avenue for citizens to challenge politicians because of the relative ease of creating and disseminating information these platforms. This broadens political communication and gives rise to new ways of civic participation and agency in electoral politics, before, during or after elections.

For example, during Cameroon's 2018 elections, separatists barred movement in the English-speaking regions during the presidential campaign period. The rebels threatened the English-speaking Cameroonians with death if they got involved in the presidential election. Obviously due to security fears, candidates could not hold physical meetings in the conflict areas. And so therefore, the alternative was social media. Political messages were disseminated through Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and WhatsApp daily and debates and discussions took place in these online platforms (Ngange, 2018). In the pre-voting stage, social media shaped the voting behaviour of electorates especially that of the youth. Young Cameroonians sought information from like-minded political experts on social media and equally interacted with candidates about their political manifestos on the same platforms. The information gathered reduced the indecision about voting and increased the intention of voting according to Ngange (2018).

In Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland, Mthembu and Lunga (2020) found that social media was potentially an ideal platform for dialogue and political communication. However, many citizens in the three countries were still excluded from social media because of the high cost of accessing the Internet and its

inaccessibility in the rural areas. Moreover, the lack of skills to make meaningful use of the Internet was also another major setback for online participation. Social media did not replace the traditional campaign approaches but rather augmented them.

Muzee and Enaifoghe (2020) found that in Uganda political deliberations were no longer confined to parliamentary and legislative structures, they now also occurred on social media, and this promoted deliberative democracy. Uganda saw the rise of Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu better known as Bobi Wine during an unprecedented wave of social media censorship and free speech infringement. Wine exploited the power of social media as a political tool for communication and mobilization. For Muzee and Enaifoghe (2020), the newfound power of the Internet and social media has provided citizens with an outlet and space to express their concerns and debate alternatives to oppression as the Ugandan government increases repressive measures.

In Ghana, "the emergence of social media as a mobilising medium for civil society and other voluntary associations has deepened the participatory principle in Ghana's fledgling democracy. The greater stakeholder involvement using social media platforms adds to the participatory ideal" (Dzisah, 2018: 43). In the 2012 Ghana presidential elections social media played an important role as the supporters of the two leading political parties, the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC), continuously engaged in political campaigning on Facebook and Twitter even after the official campaign activities had ceased. According to Dzisah (2018), this indicated that Ghanaian politicians and voters had embraced the idea of social media as a source of political information which was a complementary and effective communication tool. The preference of social media over other traditional media allowed for greater freedom and participation making social media use a mobilising vehicle that deepened the participatory principle in Ghana's bourgeoning democracy (Dzisah, 2018).

Social Media Activism:

"Social media and activism have been inseparable since the 2010 Arab Spring demonstrations and since 2013, when the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag was used for the first time" (Reid and Sehl, 2020: 1). Social media and the explosion of hashtags have since played an enormous role in the mobilization of human rights movements online and offline. Social media activism which occurs online and predominantly uses hashtags as a form of protest and advocacy for causes is a term often used interchangeably with online and hashtag activism. Hashtags play

a significant role in mobilizing social movements on political issue. However, without offline action the use of hashtags comes across as performative, opportunistic, and lazy (Reid and Sehl, 2020). Critics refer to this minimal activist effort as 'slacktivism.'

Slacktivism is when "low-cost symbolic actions such as sharing, "liking," changing one's profile image, and generally posting activist content on social media" (Freelon et al, 2020: 1) projects an impression of efficacy without being effective. Christensen (2011) argues that the origins of the term slacktivism is debated, but Fred Clark takes credit for using the term in 1995 in a seminar series held together with Dwight Ozard. Clark and Ozard (1995) used the term slacktivism to shorten slacker activism, which refer to bottom-up activities by young people to affect society on a small personal scale used. In their usage, the term had a positive connotation. "Today, the term is used in a more negative sense to belittle activities that do not express a full–blown political commitment. The concept generally refers to activities that are easily performed, but they are considered more effective in making the participants feel good about themselves than to achieve the stated political goals" (Christensen, 2011: 1).

In Zimbabwe, slacktivism is perhaps demonstrated by the Twitter users Ncube (2017) characterizes as 'Young Twitter'. Young Twitter is more inclined to discussions of social life such as entertainment; popular culture, memes, music, movies, TV shows, nudes, and engaging in twars (Twitter wars). These young Zimbabwean Twitter users appear to be dissatisfied with mainstream politics although this should not be interpreted as a lack of interest on their part. They actively participate using trending hashtags (#ZimbabweanLivesMatter) to raise awareness on the political situation in the country. However, these online actions do translate to offline action.

Online activism takes many forms, from symbolic signalling of one's stance on a politicised issue to more complex engagement. Social media facilitates online activism in at least three ways. First, they allow individuals to express experiences and opinions, relating them to collective causes. Second, they allow online community members to provide support, organise activities, and challenge negative responses to their activities. Third, social media allow people to involve others outside their online community to collectively negotiate new shared realities and spread these. Online and offline activism are typically closely integrated with online activism facilitating offline protest by advertising and organising it (Greijdanus et al, 2020). To ensure that online activism has an impact offline, scholars have argued that activists should encourage others to add their own story to the larger narrative when tweeting or sharing.

This can be especially effective on social media sites like Twitter, which allow for threads so that the core of an original argument can exist alongside newer tweets, thus keeping the primary narrative fresh. Additionally, activists should string together multiple hashtags in tweets as this would likely make ignoring injustices increasingly difficult (Pinon, 2020). Papacharissi (2016) posits that the countless stories of how media serve as conduits for affective expression in historical moments that promise social change are typically stories of connection and expression. Thus, in the use of hashtags they then serve as framing devices that allow crowds to be rendered into publics; networked publics that want to tell their story collaboratively and on their own terms. "These networked publics come together and/or disband around bonds of sentiment, and I describe them as affective" (Papacharissi, 2016: 308) and they assemble around media and platforms that invite affective attunement, support affective investment, and propagate affectively charged expression, like Twitter. Papacharissi (2016) describes affective publics as networked publics that are mobilized and connected, identified, and potentially disconnected through expressions of sentiment. The connective action emerges out of personal frames on current affairs coalescing via the expressive and connective affordances of networked platforms, including Twitter (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013).

As social movements grow, activists employ increasingly sophisticated strategies online (Munslow, 2020). The most notable strategies in recent times have seen the dedicated fans of Korean pop music fans swamp the hashtag #WhiteLivesMatter with videos of their favourite stars (Hou, 2020). Other users on YouTube have also worked out ways to use the site's advertising system to increase revenue for causes they support (Hamedy and Giuliani-Hoffman, 2020).

Zimbabwean citizens who have been unable to protest in the streets now refer to themselves as 'keyboard warriors' (Mustaka, 2020). In Zimbabwe, protests are usually thwarted using military intervention where protestors are killed and maimed without any repercussions. A case in point is when protestors were gunned down by Zimbabwe's army during the 1 August 2018 and mid-January 2019 protest with a combined 23 casualties recorded (Matyszak, 2019). These citizens increasingly use social media to put pressure on the Zimbabwean government to initiate the reforms it promised. The keyboard warriors have also adopted the hashtag #ZimbabweanLivesMatter to embolden global pressure on President Mnangagwa's government. The strategy appears to be working so far as tens of thousands of people from Jamaican reggae stars to American rap and hip-hop musicians have joined African celebrities, politicians, and former presidents in using the hashtag (Mustaka, 2020). #ZimbabweanLivesMatter is

fashioned after #BlackLivesMatter, the global protests staged since the killing of American, George Floyd by a police officer in May 2020.

For a while, #ZimbabweanLivesMatter gained considerable attention aided by the Zimbabwean governments' use of restrictions to clamp down on press freedoms, violate human rights, and arrest activists (notably journalist Hopewell Chin'ono). The government defends these unconstitutional acts by citing the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic as cover. Furthermore, the government is also using the lockdown period to quietly amend the constitution to consolidate executive powers without any input from citizens (Chigumadzi, 2020). In sum, Zimbabwe's activists have determinedly used #ZimbabweanLivesMatter to lobby for national, regional, and international support after the governments' overindulgence in abuse of state power (Chingono, 2020).

As #ZimbabweanLivesMatter rages on, what becomes apparent is that the hashtag activism might not be enough. This online activism requires offline action to avoid descending into slacktivism (Christensen, 2011; Rotman et al, 2011; Freelon et al, 2020). However, the Zimbabwean government relies heavily on the state's security apparatus to crush all forms of dissent. Therefore, taking the protests offline will have disastrous consequences. For now, Zimbabweans realise that social media activism has a massive international influence and cannot be confronted by traditional authoritarian tactics. Moreover, #ZimbabweanLivesMatter's broad appeal has unnerved the Zimbabwean government. In a televised address, Mnangagwa declared that his security forces would continue to crush dissent (Nyoka, 2020). A top ZANU-PF official, Obert Mpofu, also took to Twitter to push back against the #ZimbabweanLivesMatter hashtag, saying that hashtags come and go but, ZANU-PF would endure beyond trending hashtags (Harding, 2020). The government has also always been quick to threaten shutting down the Internet in attempts to stifle any form of anti-government protests (Access Now, 2020).

In other African countries most notably Tanzania, President John Magufuli's administration has fast-tracked legislation that bans all forms of digital protests. The organizing, planning, or even supporting any form of demonstration on the Internet is now illegal in Tanzania. The new legislation also places a ban on the sharing of information about any infectious disease outbreaks (motivated by the COVID-19 pandemic) without government permission (State Craft, 2020). The ban even extends to private message platforms such as WhatsApp. Activists in Tanzania say these new rules that restrict online content infringe on people's freedom of expression and rightly so. MISA Zimbabwe (2020) condemned the legislation as moving Tanzania further away from the agreed upon democratic

principles and tenets of freedom of expression. They also argue that these regulations will allow the Tanzanian administration to snoop into private conversations and persecute citizens for whatever they post. The Tanzanian government is no stranger to controversial moves that restrict the freedoms of expression. In 2018, they introduced new online regulations for bloggers, online radio and television services which required they pay annual fees to operate.

Some of Tanzania's Eastern African neighbours, Kenya, and Uganda, also introduced social media taxes which have had devastating effects on the digital rights of Internet users and freedom of expression in general. Uganda introduced its social media tax in May 2018 to 'curb gossip and broaden the country's tax base' according to the Ugandan government. In Kenya, the government introduced taxes on Internet service data and Mobile Money which led to the rise of costs for Internet access and for making calls (Lab Team, 2020). With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Uganda's social media tax has undermined the fight against the virus. Several requests to suspend the tax during the deadly pandemic have been made, but the Ugandan administration has upheld it (Nanfuka, 2020). This has needlessly resulted in the exclusion of some of the population from easily accessing essential information and resources via social media platforms.

Social media activism in Africa has also extended to feminism where a global wave of awareness and action on violence against women has emerged. The use of hashtags such as #EverydaySexism, #UrgentAction4Women, and #EndFGM (female genital mutilation) has opened new opportunities for feminist movement building (Kangere et al, 2017). In Uganda, one woman's post in Facebook posts translated into the Pads4Girls campaign to provide free sanitary towels to girls in March 2017. This was after Ugandan President, Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, failed to honour his campaign promise to provide free menstrual hygiene materials if re-elected (Selnes and Orgeret, 2020). The Pads4Girls campaign was championed by Stella Nyanzi who used Facebook to rally women and all Ugandan citizens to demand that the government fulfil its election campaign promise of supplying sanitary towels for free. Pads4Girls was much successful than #ZimbabweanLivesMatter because their activities were organised both online and offline.

However, social media has also equally amplified discrimination, sexism and, bigotry against female politicians (Ncube and Yemurai, 2020). Although different forms of legislative measures that seek to protect different Internet users exist, they remain largely ineffective in patriarchal societies where women are infantilised and considered incapable of holding positions of power, especially if they are unmarried.

Drawing from the examples listed in this chapter thus far, Zimbabwe appears to have joined the global community in adopting social media activism. It remains to be seen whether Zimbabwean's online activities will eventually translate to offline action which will likely bear more tangible results.

The Zimbabwean Experience:

As Zimbabwe increasingly uses Twitter for electoral processes, Chibuwe (2020) argues that the platform has also become more of an 'insults sphere' than a public sphere with the latter characterised by critical rational engagement between netizens. Chibuwe (2020) says that in the engagements between the two main supporters of the major political parties ZANU-PF and MDC-A there is rarely any rational debate. Alternatively, Karekwaivanane (2019) uncovers a rich discursive sphere on Facebook where citizens debate and try to make sense of the country's troubled politics. Karekwaivanane (2019) argues that through the Baba Jukwa Facebook Page, Zimbabweans use symbolically laden pseudonyms which draw on a diverse range of sources from political history to popular culture. Additionally, these Zimbabweans on Facebook "use multiple registers in deliberation, which include reasoned argument, diatribe, the expression of religious sentiment, and a carnivalesque mode of expression and the preoccupation with conspiracy theory" (Karekwaivanane, 2019: 68).

For Mare (2018), Zimbabwe's politicians and political parties are overemphasising informing and mobilising on social media at the expense of connecting and involving the electorate in their digital campaigns. Furthermore, there is a failure by politicians to take advantage of the massive databases on Facebook with names, demographic information and phone numbers of their followers and supporters to reach them outside of the online sphere. When it comes to the electorate, "there is also a need for digital media literacy so that citizens can appreciate the power of the Internet, content and the role of insidious political and economic actors that are behind certain websites and social media platforms" (Mare and Matsilele, 2020: 173). Notwithstanding the digitization of electoral campaigns in the global North, Mare and Matsilele (2020) still find that traditional campaign strategies like rallies, songs, door-to-door canvassing, word of mouth and mass media are still very popular in counties like Zimbabwe. These are especially popular in rural and peri-urban contexts where access to the Internet is limited. In countries like South Africa, Bosch et al (2018) present on how social movements deploy alternative communicative strategies to mobilize and gain visibility where access to the mainstream media is limited. These South African social movements "combine traditional mobilization methods such as toyi-toying (a militant march-dance), stay-aways, blockading of roads, and sit-ins with an

engagement with media to convey their message. These movements also use various smaller and alternative media such as pamphlets, press statements, videos, and new media platforms to express their views and mobilize support" (Chiumbu, 2015: 3). Hence, these alternative media platforms fall under the term nanomedia which refers to a "range of "nano" – or small-scale – communicative activities addressed to (and received by) different audiences" (Bosch et al, 2018: 2154).

Another equally worrying trend in Zimbabwe's politics and democratization processes is that the use of social media has heightened misogyny in the political sphere (Mateveke and Chikafa-Chipiro, 2020). Women and men should have equal and fair participation in political debate and activities during elections as this equality and fairness is the hallmark of democracy. Hence, Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen (2012) posit that the participation of women in the domain of politics is increasingly relevant to the general pursuit of a more egalitarian society. However, Zimbabwean women involved in elections and those running for political office are constantly belittled and reminded of their gender on social media by male users. Mateveke and Chikafa-Chipiro (2020) find that discussions on Twitter almost always focus on the gender of the politicians, if they are women, instead of their policies. This leads to Ncube and Yemurai (2020) arguing that the increased participation of women in politics will remain elusive if they must perpetually deal with sexist harassment and bullying – online and offline.

Some of these issues highlighted expose the undesirable outcomes borne out of the use of social media in politics with particular focus on Zimbabwe which has remained a steadfast patriarchal society. Therefore, it is also significant to temper the optimistic view of social media in African democracies. Nevertheless, "social media is winning more people to politics through a unique blend of audio, visuals and other information types that permit close monitoring of those seeking votes" (Mano and Ndlela, 2020: 2). Social media has brought a new agency, tactics, and strategies to the evolving relationship between politicians and citizens. Mano and Ndlela (2020) even opine that Africans are using social media in ways that are producing changes to political cultures.

The Influence of Social Media on Democracy:

The influence of social media on democracy uncovers three key models: political expression, political participation, and political learning (De Zuniga et al, 2018). Thus, social media 'nurtures democracy' (Saldana et al, 2015; Kim et al, 2016) by exposing political news to citizens, either actively or incidentally, which has been found to be positively related to political participation. Citizens also increasingly

express themselves on social media, and political expression is an influential precursor to political engagement.

Conversely, Margetts (2018) suggests that others blame social media for almost everything that is wrong with democracy. Social media are accused of being responsible for "the pollution of the democratic environment through fake news, junk science, computational propaganda and aggressive micro-targeting and political advertising" (Margetts, 2018: 1). Thus, social media create filter bubbles where users then exist in the ever-narrower echo chambers of personalised news and connections with like-minded people. Social media use "creates echo chambers where people only see viewpoints they agree with – further driving us apart" (Chakrabarti, 2018: 1). Filter bubbles and echo chambers are implicated in "the rise of populism, political polarisation, waves of hate against women and minorities, far-right extremism and radicalisation, post-truth, political chaos, the end of democracy and ultimately, the death of democracy" (Margetts, 2018: 1). Additionally, Chakrabarti (2018) contends that the Internet can do damage to a well-functioning democracy. Chakrabarti (2018) premises his argument on the fact that social media is susceptible to foreign interference. Here, foreign entities set up and promote fake social media accounts to influence public sentiment particularly around electoral processes. The unequal participation on social media platforms can also distort the perception of public opinion as not everyone is using their voice equally. For example, Chakrabarti (2018) says that women who represent most of the population are under-represented in public political dialogue, especially on Facebook.

In Africa, Mutsvairo and Ronning (2020) argue that the bulk of the analysis that has focused on social media has concluded that they have the potential to instigate positive social change and develop democratic ways of communication. The civil society has been empowered and the opposition to authoritarian politics strengthened when using social media. Yet, "there is a clear tension between how social media could, on the one hand, be applied to strengthen democratic discourses and allow for a wider range of voices, and how on the other hand, authoritarian as well as more democratic states use these tools to control digital communication" (Mutsvairo and Ronning, 2020: 322).

Inevitably, "if there's one fundamental truth about social media's impact on democracy it's that it amplifies human intent – both good and bad" (Chakrabarti, 2018: 1). The Zimbabwean government has recognized this and are actively seeking to fast-track a Cyber Security and Data Protection Bill (Transparency International, 2020). The Bill contains provisions that will obstruct the crucial role of civil society and the media in the fight against corruption. These provisions

undermine the freedom of expression and freedom of the media that are codified in Section 61 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe. Clause 164C of the Bill criminalises the spread of what the government classifies as false information online, punishable with a jail term of up to five years, or a fine, or both.

The Bill appears to have already claimed its first victim with the arrest of Hopewell Chin'ono who exposed government corruption on Twitter. Chin'ono even documented his arrest on Facebook Live, as eight state security agents forced their way into his Harare home. Chin'ono exposed state corruption and social injustice with critical tweets while urging people to peacefully protest government corruption. Chin'ono has since been charged with incitement to participate in public violence and for sharing on his Twitter account information pertaining to the organization of protests on 31 July 2020 (Mutlokwa, 2020). Chin'ono's arrest instigated #ZimbabweanLivesMatter which sought to alert the rest of the world to human rights abuses, the violation of the constitution and the continued disregard of the rule of law by the Zimbabwean government. Older hashtags such as #ThisFlag, #zimshutdown2016, and #Tajamuka/#Sesijikile have trended before over multiple human rights violations taking place in Zimbabwe, but none have been as successful as #ZimbabweanLivesMatter according to Mutlokwa (2020). As Zimbabweans increasingly use social media it becomes apparent that the platforms are "an alternative counter public sphere or a subaltern public sphere – a space where the constraints and surveillance of an authoritarian state are circumvented" (Mungwari and Ndhlebe, 2019: 279).

Social media in Zimbabwe is increasingly being harnessed to make political demands on human rights, accountability, and good governance. The use of social media platforms by Zimbabweans has enabled them to engage in cyber-activism that mobilises political action and creates networked transactional publics that can be vehicles for political change. In doing so, Zimbabweans are reclaiming their political space and voice by using social media platforms. Mungwari and Ndhlebe (2019) conclude that social media have become a launch pad for political activism, civil resistance, and exposure of corruption in Zimbabwe. Social media is providing a discursive space for ordinary citizens, giving them the voice to articulate their problems and to challenge the excesses of the government – epitomised by endemic corruption and bad governance. Additionally, social media platforms are making cyber-activism possible by bridging the technological gap and facilitating citizens' entry into the participation of Zimbabwe's political impasse (Hove and Chenzi, 2020). Prior to the introduction of social media platforms, Zimbabwe's government responded to citizen demands by enacting rigid legislation, imprisonment, displacements, abductions, abandoning voter education, rigging

elections, dividing the opposition, and manipulating the media and the judiciary (Hove, 2019).

Guess and Lyons (2020) posit the rise of social media has previously inspired great optimism about their potential to level access to economic and political opportunity, enable collective action, and facilitate new forms of expression. However, they acknowledge that after several political upheavals the positive outlook has become decidedly less optimistic. Hence, the assertion that "Facebook and Twitter are more likely to be discussed as incubators of "fake news" and propaganda than as tools for empowerment and social change" (Guess and Lyons, 2020: 10). These fake news (false or misleading messages spread using social media) now see the use of terms such as misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda. Hence, the growing concern that misinformation spread via social media is causing increasing social divisions and even violence across the political world. Barberá (2020) concludes that the unexpected rise of populist parties and candidates and the recent uptick in political violence gives urgency to the debate about the role social media play in exacerbating polarization and inciting extremist violence. Sunstein (2018) argue that the emergence of echo chambers where extremist ideas are amplified due to the use of social media in allowing politically likeminded individuals to find one another is the principal contributor to political polarization.

Woolley (2020) also adds that bots which are programmed to look and act like real people on sites like Facebook or Twitter add to political polarization as they are key tools for spreading computational propaganda. Bessi and Ferrara (2016) argue that bots in online political discussion create three tangible issues. First, influence can be redistributed across suspicious accounts that may be operated with malicious purposes; second, political conversation becomes further polarized, and third, the spreading of misinformation and unverified information is enhanced. However, bots can also be used for democratic good as Tsvetkova et al (2017) advance that journalists, activists, commentators, and civic society groups have built chatbots aimed at openly engendering general political conversation. Følstad et al (2018) also add that recently there has also been a rise in producing social bots aimed at stimulating conversation on pressing social issues, revealing political malfeasance, and calling attention to protests. Bots are also being used to generate stories in the reporting of pending and real-time natural disasters or public health concerns (Lokot and Diakopoulos 2016; Lemelshtrich 2018). Therefore, Woolley (2020) contends that to prevent the political misuse of bots over social media, it is crucial to understand the complex

ways in which bots facilitate and amplify the flow of misinformation, disinformation, trolling, and propaganda.

Conclusion:

In reviewing literature that addresses the influence of social media on democracy, this chapter identifies that some scholars (Ahmed et al, 2016) opine that in economically developing countries, social media's role in politics is largely unknown. Emmer and Kunst (2018) also argue that most studies on the role of ICTs in political participation and political communication research reflect a Western-centric understanding of politics and participation. The political and cultural contexts from developing world regions such as Africa have been neglected. Therefore, the present research aims in part to bridge this gap by contributing to the body of knowledge that speaks about the influence of social media and role of ICTs in democratization processes in these economically developing countries. The term 'economically developing countries' is usually a euphemism for African and some Latin-American countries. This study focuses on Africa and particularly the countries that have defective democratic systems like Zimbabwe. The political deliberation by Zimbabwean citizens has increased due to social media use. These political deliberations now extend beyond mainstream (legacy) media which are infiltrated by state actors.

Alfandika and Akpojivi (2020) posit that in the last three decades, the focus of most media studies in Zimbabwe have been on how the media should enhance democracy. The present research further contributes to this growing body of literature on the democratization potential of media in Zimbabwe. The use of social media has transformed the restricted Zimbabwean media space. As citizen movements increasingly use social media to mobilise for political action, so are networked transnational publics created in the country.

However, Zimbabwe's online engagement on political issues is yet to result in the effective physical participation in electoral processes, protests, and rallies. During the polls in 2018 social media accommodated numerous deliberations about the votes, but Election Day did not reflect this as there was a low voter turnout. Dendere theorizes that "one possibility is that those already planning to vote are also engaging in online discussions about politics whereas those abstaining from voting are not engaging in online discussions" (Dendere, 2019: 187). Nevertheless, Suntai and Targema (2017) affirm that social media platforms are formidable forces in the consolidation of democracy as they bridge the information gap. Democracy, which entails popular participation in the process of governance benefits immensely from deliberations on social media. Social media benefits

democracy in that it strengthens the cherished principles of transparency and accountability in the process of governance due to the increased proliferation of political deliberations taking place on the platforms. In sum, Suntai and Targema (2017) say social media is proving to be a useful tool in the hands of activists and concerned citizens to participate in governance issues as they effectively play the watchdog role.

As much of African mainstream media remains "captured by commercial and political interests" (Mano, 2020: 61), social media now provides alternative discursive spaces for citizens to dialogue. On social media citizens now coalesce to converse on all social, economic, and political aspects. Hence, social media in Africa is "broadening political communication and giving rise to new ways of civic participation and agency in electoral politics, before, during or after elections" (Mano, 2020: 61).

Twitter is identified as an emerging space for mobilising resistance to authoritarianism and failed promises from elections. Twitter conversations, according to Mano (2020), are producing important shared references and resources for users to help frame their resistance against autocratic leaders. Twitter allows citizens who are usually politically victimised to develop political voices and to provide alternative narratives against bad leadership, before, during and after election campaigns. In sum, "dialogue involving contentious issues like dissent and activism can no longer be ignored, managed as a risk or feared" (Benecke and Verwey, 2020: 145). Social media have enabled the digital realm to become a public space that facilitates resistance from the margins as digital dialogues continue to drastically alter our social and political realities.

Moreover, Diamond (2012) maintains that in recent decades few, if any, developments have overwhelmingly transformed politics and civil society than the emergence of digital information and communication technologies (ICTs). "Prominent among these have been the Internet; the sprawling blogosphere that it has spawned; the proliferating array of social-media tools such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr; and the galloping growth in access to these digital media through mobile phones. These electronic tools have provided new, breathtakingly dynamic, and radically decentralized means for people and organizations to communicate and cooperate with one another for political and civic ends" (Diamond, 2012: 1). As a result, digital communication technologies have transformed elections, political debate, civic advocacy, philanthropy, and the structure of the mass media in contemporary democracies.

In the next chapter, the theoretical framework which is premised on democratic listening is introduced. A lack of listening by politicians is exposing how they are disconnected from the electorate and their needs, which has led to democratic deficiencies. Hence, the need to revive good listening between politicians and their constituents to invigorate democracy (Dobson, 2012).

CHAPTER 4

Democratic Listening and Digital Citizenship as Theoretical Frameworks.

Introduction:

The present research examines how social media is influencing democracy in Africa. Zimbabwe's 2018 plebiscite is used as a case study where influence is gauged by how citizens leverage social media for democratic objectives.

The research is grounded on the thesis that social media has now changed the way citizens and politicians engage and deliberate on matters of governance. When it comes to citizens, their ability to express themselves is the hallmark of democracy. In these political dialogues there is an assumed expectation that those engaging are listening to each other. However, Dobson declares that "good listening has been almost completely ignored in that form of political conversation we know as democracy" (2012: 1). Hence, the present research attempts to assess if, and how, the politicians and citizens are 'listening' to each other. With political scientists inundated with discussions around the conditions necessary for countries to build strong and stable democracies, Dobson (2012) suggests that democratic theory and practice would be re-invigorated by attention to listening.

Semaan et al (2014) assert that social media can be viewed as a new type of online public sphere which accommodates the ever-increasing use of the internet for political activity. The affordances of social media provide a space through which citizens engage in meaningful political interactions. However, not much focus is placed on whether citizens and politicians are listening to each other in these political deliberations. And while citizen deliberation is necessary for a well-functioning democracy, it is not sufficient. Hence, "a participatory democracy encourages all constituents to play an active role in the direction and operation of the political system" (Jennings et al, 2020: 5) and this can be achieved by paying attention to listening to each other. Additionally, Scudder (2021) argues that 'talk centric' deliberative democratic theory tends to focus on voice while overlooking the importance and challenge of listening. Thus, listening and listening-related concepts like reciprocity and respect are then often taken as either background conditions or assumptions of deliberation.

Democratic listening by digital citizens:

A political system that facilitates and encourages sincere and careful listening among its citizens will produce more democratic decisions because "the more citizens listen to one another when forming political opinions, the better" (Scudder, 2020: 1). With an abundance of digital citizens due to the proliferation

of the internet and social media, a democratic listening approach to deliberation is more than plausible. “Being digital citizen is more important thing in nowadays” (Isman and Canan Gungoren, 2014: 73). If digital citizens are not listened to, or do not listen to each other, the values of inclusion and empowerment will have no democratic impact. Listening has the “power to change lived reality, infusing a decision-making process with democratic meaning” (Scudder, 2020: 1).

This thesis thus argues that digital citizens should adhere to and practice democratic listening on online platforms to help their democratic prospects in effectively anything. Traditional citizenship studies (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004a, 2004b) have focused on public participation in the political process. Today, Jones and Mitchell (2016) confirm that conceptualizations of citizenship are becoming more inclusive of a range of civic behaviours such as participating in community activities, working to improve community or societal problems, and addressing social injustices. The premise of this thesis is thus listening – democratic listening – will improve these range of civic behaviours democratically. Hintz (2017) define digital citizenship as the self-enactment of people’s role in society using digital technologies and thus it has empowering and democratizing characteristics. This thesis is premised on the adding of democratic listening to this whole ecology to argue that social media can positively influence democratization processes in Zimbabwe and Africa.

The ‘Listening President’:

After the controversial election of Mnangagwa to Zimbabwe’s presidency, he declared that he was a ‘listening president’ (Nyoka, 2018) and promised that his government would be committed to constitutionalism, the rule of law, and judicial independence. Two years into a five-year term, and after promising a flood of foreign investment and political reforms, Mnangagwa has delivered neither (Sguazzin, 2020). Instead, Mnangagwa’s administration has consistently remained intolerant of basic rights, peaceful dissent, and free expression.

Human Rights Watch (2020) report that during nationwide protests in mid-January 2019, security forces killed at least 17 people, raped at least 17 women, shot, and injured 81 people, and arrested over 1000 suspected protesters during door-to-door raids. The freedoms of expression and assembly have also been highly curtailed with the government instructing Internet service providers to shut down access to social media and the Internet between 15 January 2019 to 21 January 2019.

The Human Rights Watch Report (2020) demonstrates that Zimbabwe’s democratic conditions are worsening. This exposes Mnangagwa’s promise to be

a listening president. Sorensen et al (2019) argue that governments often employ listening as a rhetorical exercise undertaken for instrumental reasons to boost popularity when they are in a state of decline. The exaggerated claims by politicians of being listeners risk dismissal and derision by the increasingly cynical publics that are repeatedly subjected to their insincere gestures.

Bassel (2017) advances that we listen for the simple reason of achieving political equality which is a fundamental value of all democratic conditions. O'Donnell et al (2009) further add that listening provides a means of moving beyond questions of speaking and voice to canvass issues of dialogue and meaningful interaction across difference and inequality.

Consequentially, the present research settles on the concept of listening as it attempts to uncover the influence of social media on democratization processes.

Democratic Listening:

Dobson (2012) argues that to achieve democratic objectives, the role of listening must be evaluated in connection with four central themes of democratic theory and practice, that is, legitimacy, disagreement, understanding and empowerment.

Legitimacy:

Zimbabwe's ZANU-PF government has for the better part of the last three decades battled with the question of legitimacy as accusations of vote-rigging dog every election they win. On 31 December 2019, the government published the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 2) Bill, an omnibus bill containing a raft of changes ranging from the appointment process of judges to the composition of Cabinet and Parliament. Hofisi (2020) says criticism of the bill has been swift and primarily focused on the widening scope of presidential powers which would undermine democratic accountability. The projected burgeoning of central government has also been fiercely disparaged. A such, Zimbabweans across the country have emphatically rejected these intended constitutional amendments.

Ndebele (2020) intimates that civic society groups and academics argue that if the No. 2 Amendment passes, it would undermine the principles of separation of power, accountability, and democracy. Astonishingly, the Zimbabwean government has chosen to hold the hearings during the countrywide lockdown necessitated by the global COVID-19 pandemic which restricts gatherings and the numbers of those wishing to attend. Evidently, the government is trying to limit the rejection of the proposed amendment by holding the hearings during a pandemic. However, the Zimbabwean government would benefit from listening

to its citizens concerning the proposed constitutional amendments to improve their legitimacy claim.

Disagreement:

Listening can also be used as a method of coping with deep disagreements and rifts. On 31 March 2020, the Supreme Court issued a ruling which effectively stripped opposition leader Nelson Chamisa of his leadership claim over the main faction of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). This ruling "further fractured the opposition, casting doubt over its credibility as an alternative to ZANU-PF" (Chikohomero, 2020: 1). Zimbabwe's opposition has been engaged in disagreements leading to several splits further fracturing the already fragile challengers. The disagreements are a result of power struggles as individuals jostle for the leadership of the party. Bickford (1996) reasons that political listening leads to the connecting of parties that conflict with one another. Democratic politics requires this connection so that politics is made possible. "Relation-building, sharing disparate understandings, developing reciprocity, perhaps even empathizing with those with whom one disagrees" (Dobson, 2012: 5) would benefit Zimbabwe's fragment opposition.

Understanding:

Dobson's (2012) third principle for listening is that it can lead to better understanding. Understanding is indispensable to one of modern democracy's principal ambitions – the effective representation of people's interests. Effective representation leads to the empowerment of citizens.

Empowerment:

Dryzek (2002) asserts that the best way to silence and disenfranchise people is to refuse to listen to them. And so, Dobson (2012) argues that listening has the capacity to empower and include. The political processes for democracy would benefit if the political community were listened to. Thus, listening plays an overall key role in creating a vibrant and plural public realm.

Good Listening:

Other scholars (Sorenson et al, 2019) intimate that good listening must become an integral part of governance to improve democratic responsiveness. Good listening requires three things to be successful in the pursuit of democratic societies. Firstly, Sorenson et al (20190 say that listening must be sincere in its aim of dialogue. Any undertaking of listening that conceives of the public as consumers and followers is "a misleading gesture: more a cultivated appearance of listening than an experience of sharing ideas" (Coleman 2004: 118). Secondly,

"good listening resists the inclination to preconceive the nature, values and opinions of those being listened to" (Sorenson et al, 2019: 3). Thirdly, Sorenson et al (2019) advance that good listening does not necessarily require agreement with a speaker's point of view, rather it allows for the conflicts and differences inherent in politics to result in joint action.

Modes of Listening – Reciprocal Listening:

With social media giving politicians access to millions of users, Crawford (2019) argues that this offers these representatives the capacity to build a sense of solidarity and to connect with the broader constituency. This has led to most Heads of State using social media to update their citizens, to ask for support, to campaign and to announce policies. Twitter has become the most significant method for communication especially during election campaigns. Thus, Crawford (2019) claims that most politicians now engage in a kind of reciprocal listening – hearing and responding to comments and direct messages (DMs) on social media. Other politicians simply adopt a "broadcast-only model, leaving no room for dialogue with their contacts" (Crawford, 2019: 530).

Background Listening:

Crawford (2019) describes background listening as an act of 'tuning in' where a Twitter user simply follows – but never engages – a range of people who post updates that can be useful advice, amusing anecdotes, or interesting links. This reflects part of the process of their engagement with and on social media. These shared updates are simply scanned quickly and not focused on. This means background listening is when "commentary and conversations continue as a backdrop throughout the day, with only a few moments requiring concentrated attention" (Crawford, 2019: 528).

Delegated Listening:

Crawford (2019) argues that listening is difficult to outsource. The communication becomes "reduced to the level of an impersonal, unidirectional marketing broadcast. The benefit of being able to hear customers' views, rapidly respond to their comments and concerns, and gain insight into how the company is being discussed is sharply reduced" (Crawford, 2019: 531). Delegated listening is when the services of professional micro-bloggers are hired to communicate and maintain an online presence on behalf of politicians or businesses. Politicians usually task their staffers to update their Twitter accounts, but most businesses comprehend the benefits of using social media "to forge a closer relationship with

customers, gain information about products, and enhance public personae" (Crawford, 2019: 531).

One-way Listening and Two-Way Listening.

Lynch and Mendelsohn (2013) divide listening into two main modes – one-way listening and two-way listening. These two modes of listening intersect with two principal functions of language – transaction and interaction. Transaction's main purpose is the transfer of information and interaction serves to maintain social relations. One-way listening which is transactional is important in academic settings such as lectures and school lessons and this is what Lynch and Mendelsohn (2013) call listening to learn. Lynch and Mendelsohn (2013) say that two-way listening might be more accurately termed listening-and-speaking because it involves dialogue or discussion. A society where only some citizens speak or expect to be listened to would fall short of the normative standards of democracy. Thus, in the next section the chapter uses two-way listening to explore how digital citizenship enhances democracy.

Digital Citizenship and Democracy:

Busch et al (2018) argue that the theorists of democracy and early net activists understand that the expansion of communication channels by means of the Internet has improved democracy. The new ways of interactions enabled by the Internet now reduce the information asymmetry between politicians and citizens. These new ways the enable broader participation in societal discussions and are enhancing countries democratic qualities. Consequently, Web 2.0 is enabling lasting effects on political communication and participation. Theiner et al, (2018) argue that political communication must be differentiated from political participation as the former is the transport and exchange of political messages and information. The latter aims to shape (directly or indirectly) the political actions and the decisions of political actors (elites, office holders, or candidates).

Shelley et al (2004) point out that politicians interact with constituents online, interest groups use web sites and e-mail to connect with the public. Media organizations continuously update the news on their information-rich sites and governments make vital information and documents available to their citizens via the Internet. Online information also provides the basis for environmental or personal health protection. These and other communicative functions are all aspects of digital citizenship, and this makes citizenship increasingly mediated by digital communication. Shelley et al (2004) further add that the rise of the virtual individual and cyberspace community substantively changes both the way citizens can engage democracy and the prerequisites for equitable participation.

Thus, Hintz et al assert that "in a datafied world, we increasingly interact with our social and political environment through digital media. Digital tools and platforms have become essential for us to participate in society. Political engagement takes place through social media debates and online campaigns; access to services increasingly requires online interactions between citizens and the state or commercial providers; and a plethora of digital traces and registrations are both the condition for, and consequence of, a variety of human activity, from crossing borders to operating a phone. Everyday cultural practices involve social media exchanges, and business transactions are mediated by the platform economy. In these (and many more) ways, we increasingly enter the sphere of civic activity – and develop agency – through digital media. Digital citizenship has emerged as a concept to describe this condition" (2018: 20).

Therefore, Vromen (2017) advances that the ubiquity of social media in the everyday lives of citizens fosters the development of digital citizenship. Digital citizenship is the ability to participate in society online and, digital citizens are those who use the Internet regularly and effectively daily (Mossberger et al, 2007). Alternatively, Ribble et al (2004) say that digital citizenship can be defined as the norms of behaviour about technology use, and they identify nine general areas of behaviour that make one a digital citizen. These nine general areas according to Ribble et al (2004) are etiquette, communication, education, access, commerce, responsibility, rights, safety, and security. Hintz et al (2017) advise that digital citizenship is the self-enactment of people's role in society using digital technologies and it has empowering and democratizing characteristics.

Mossberger et al (2017) underscore that digital citizenship has the empowering capacity of the Internet for the exercise of political, economic, and social rights and opportunities that are often associated with citizenship. Bakardjieva et al (2012) argue that when citizens, activists and participants in social movements want to voice their views and define their political identities they increasingly do so in hybrid media environments. These hybrid media environments reveal new and stimulating possibilities for mobilization, organization, and discussion. In sum, "digital citizenship has emerged as a key concept for understanding our life in a digital era. Digital infrastructures have become integrated into our everyday relations and underpin both our public and private lives. They enable interactions amongst people and between people and state institutions; they are required for accessing public services and acquiring private goods; and they are ingrained in our social, cultural. and political activities, from consuming content to shopping to expressing our political views. Digital citizenship thus denotes our roles,

positions and activities in a society that is organized through digital technologies" (Hintz et al, 2018: 144).

Digital technologies offer citizens new channels for speaking and acting together and Bakardjieva et al (2012) say this lowers the threshold for involvement in collective action and eventually politics. This changes the power dynamics of participation. Bakardjieva et al (2012) then argue that mainstream media is being by-passed by citizen reporters and commentators who provide first-hand, real-time coverage and non-hegemonic interpretations of offline political events. This has increased the pressure on traditional media organizations to include different voices originating from social media platforms, further enhancing their reach and impact. The rise of social media has also encouraged political institutions and actors to re-examine their ways of governance. They now strive to be more open and accessible. Mossberger (2009) posit that opportunities for online politics are increasing and emerging evidence demonstrates that they have significant influence in democratization processes. In the present research, I propose that political institutions and actors can realise openness and accessibility if they apply active political listening.

Not all citizens are equally present on the Internet with mostly the young and educated likely to pay attention to politic discourse online. Mossberger (2009) also add that men are also likely to be interested and invested in Internet politics than women. Thus, Bakardjieva et al (2012) raise doubts over the possibility of political causes succeeding through mediated activism alone. Therefore, Karpf (2016) offers a new political strategy that depicts digital listening in the context of analytic activism. Analytic activism is a new approach to "citizen-driven politics that makes use of the affordances of digital technologies to fashion new strategic interventions in the political arena" (Karpf, 2016: 2). Analytic activism prioritizes listening through digital channels or social media like Facebook and Twitter, or more established digital media like email and website traffic.

Karpf (2016) theorizes that digital communications leave traces that allow for new forms of listening such as digital listening. Digital listening carries two very different connotations, sometimes it implies responsive and responsible governance, "your concerns are being heard" (Karpf, 2016: 28) and other times it can sound menacing and foreboding, "they can hear you, even when you thought no one was listening!" (Karpf, 2016: 28). Therefore, "the potential promise of digital listening is that it can transform outdated and ineffective bureaucracies. The potential harm is that it can be used to repress political speech, enable psychological manipulation and the engineering of consent on a massive scale, to cloak exploitative policies behind a veil of mathematical secrecy" (Karpf, 2016: 28).

Digital Citizenship in Africa:

Emmer and Kunst (2018) argue that most studies on the role of ICTs in political participation and political communication research reflect a Western-centric understanding of politics and participation. The political and cultural contexts from developing world regions such as Africa have thus far been neglected. Despite this, the digital revolution has gathered momentum in Africa with citizens increasingly and actively participating in online public discourses, particularly on politics. Evans (2019) states that Uganda has a website called Yogera which means 'speak out' which is a platform for citizens to complain about poor service and to report corruption. Kenya has the website https://info.mzalendo.com/ (Mzalendo) which means 'eye on the Kenyan Parliament' which profiles politicians, scrutinizes public expenditure and highlights citizens' rights.

Africa is thus experiencing 'digital politics' (Evans, 2019) where Internet technologies are heightening the complex interactions between political actors and their constituencies. Digital politics describe how the digital revolution is disrupting politics and transforming political institutions and modes of political communication. The Internet has become a force for democracy and for the spread of human rights in Africa, although as a platform for active participation in public discourse it remains constantly challenged in the continent. This is because most African governments regularly shut down and restrict Internet access whenever they are challenged on their excesses.

There is a steady increase of democratization processes in most parts of Africa. West Africa is changing from anarchic one-party systems and brutal dictatorships to embracing multi-party elections with peaceful changes of government becoming the norm. Citizens now eagerly await and participate in elections, even though they are left disappointed by their credibility. East Africa also ranks as the most democratic region on the continent. However, Central Africa has experienced little to no progress in terms of human rights and democracy. Opposition parties and politicians are fragmented, civil society ineffective, and the news media remain fragile. Central Africa hosts some of the continent's longest-serving presidents – Equatorial Guinea's Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo and Cameroon's Paul Biya who have both been in power for more than 35 years; and Chad's Idriss Derby, for 25 years. Evans (2019) argues that attempts to nurture democratic norms in these countries always falter, leaving them exposed to authoritarianism and anarchy. Political participation supplemented by active listening will benefit these West African countries as they continuously trail on democratic standards.

Watermeyer and Goggin (2019) posit that "a crucial, emergent domain of citizenship globally, especially in the Global South, is found in the spaces, places, environments, capabilities, and associated attributes of information and communication technologies (ICTs)" (2019: 167). However, Bergere (2020) argues that in Africa governments are increasingly taxing internet access, sometimes targeting specific websites and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp. These actions stall the development of digital citizenship in Africa as they restrict and slow down access to an essential global resource. Thus, Bergere (2020) also asserts that how African governments rework digital infrastructures to regulate populations by enforcing internet taxes and shutdowns counters the dominant narratives that social media are democratizing forces in Africa. Digital citizenship requires frequent and effective use of the internet and this "includes civic engagement which refers to behaviours that are geared toward benefiting the common good" (Sadiku et al, 2018: 18). In a digital citizenship report on Africa, the CFI Media Development (2016) found that access to social media made civil society louder and more visible. Moreover, this access led to ordinary citizens becoming freer to make themselves heard and popular initiatives multiplied in areas where state action was in short supply.

However, Cheeseman and Garbe (2020) are of the view that digital democracy is still a long way off in Africa. Their argument is premised on that the techno-optimism brought about by the Arab Spring has given way to techno-pessimism. This is due to African leaders resisting the transformative potential of smart phones through censorship and internet shutdowns. Alternatively, "when the internet is on, social media attracts more attention for spreading fake news than preventing election rigging" (Cheeseman and Garbe, 2020: 1). While growing internet coverage has enabled citizens to challenge authoritarian rule, non-democratic leaders have also manipulated or disrupted online access. Furthermore, Cheeseman and Garbe (2020) also establish that several steps have been taken to prevent citizens from being able to express themselves online, principally the growing use of spyware across the continent to spy on government critics.

The Challenge to Digital Citizenship:

Hintz et al (2017) theorize that there may be convenience in the monitoring and processing of the online activity of digital citizens. The convenience could be in the form of targeted advertising and personalized content geared toward their consumption habits and interests. However, the extensive data collection involved in these activities has emerged as a major challenge for digital citizenship. Thus, Hintz et al establish that "under conditions of surveillance

capitalism, those who hold, manage, and control the personal data of digital citizens are offered unprecedented insights into our lives, minds, and bodies" (2017: 732). Therefore, they advance that we are confronted with the emergence of a new power dynamic. This power dynamic is premised on an order of 'haves' and 'have nots' between those who provide personal data (digital citizens) and those who own, trade, and control it – typically, large Internet companies and the state (Hintz et al, 2017).

This has significant implications for the relationship between citizens and the state despite being facilitated by the business sector. Thus, Hintz et al (2017) argue that data collection, on a mass scale, enables a mode of governance premised on profiling, sorting, and categorizing populations in ever-proliferating ways. They argue that the state/citizen relationship requires careful balance to protect civic rights and liberties and to enable participation and active citizenship. However, "in datafied environments, this balance is threatened as data collection empowers state agencies" (Hintz et al, 2017: 732).

Chitanana and Mutsvairo (2019) affirm that since 2012, Zimbabwe has witnessed a growth in digital activism. Zimbabwe's expansion of social media use coincided with economic and political recession. As a result, activists and ordinary citizens have been harnessing online platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to challenge the status quo. Thus, the present study appreciates the concerns that have been brought forward thus far and argues that in the Zimbabwean context there is still potential for social media to progressively impact its democratic processes especially if democratic listening is established in political processes.

Listening and Political Participation:

How we think about political participation has changed considerably because of the Internet and the development of social networking sites with Chadha et al (2012) asserting that grassroots participation has since amplified. Political participation is activity that has the intent or effect of influencing either regional, national, or supranational governance (Verba et al, 1995). This is either done directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or done indirectly by influencing the selection of individuals who make that policy. Others like Chatora (2012) understand political participation as referring to the various mechanisms through which the public express their political views to exercise their influence on political processes.

Political participation is generally distinguished conceptually into conventional forms of activity involving electoral processes (voting, election campaigning, running for election, and more generally, volunteering for political partiers) and

the non-conventional forms of activity which occur outside electoral processes (signing petitions, participating in political demonstrations, displaying a symbol or sign representing support for a political cause, membership of political campaigning organizations) (Contucci et al, 2018). Political participation can also be internally differentiated into electoral (elections and campaigns) and non-electoral participation with political communication structured along three dimensions namely, one, two- and three-dimensional modes of communication.

"One-dimensional communication only works in one direction, namely, from (one) sender to (many) receivers. Mass-media unidirectional communication is encountered online through RSS feeds, newsletters, web television, audio files and podcasts, or digital notice boards, among others. Two-dimensional communication implies a back-and-forth between sender and receiver. Information is not just broadcast but exchanged; recipients can reply to the sender of news items and information, as is the case with email. Three-dimensional communication through social media allows for an exchange not only between sender and receiver, but also between multiple senders and multiple recipients. Receivers can talk to each other as much as they can to the sender. Examples of social media are Facebook and Google+ (social networks), Flickr and Instagram (online communities), or Twitter (real-time microblogging)" (Theiner et al, 2018: 82).

Consequently, the willingness by citizens to publicly discuss and express their opinions to others about public affairs constitutes an important basis for a well-functioning democracy (Lee, 2007). Therefore, political participation aids the democratic processes of society and listening cannot be taken for granted (Welton, 2002), instead it must be cultivated actively by persons and collectives. Listening to each other can hold civil society together with minimal solidarity and commitment to the common good.

Social Listening on Social Media:

Boehme-Nessler (2020) theorises that the Internet and social media harbour great democratic potential. Over a billion people are active social media users, making these platforms a dynamic source of information on people's interests, needs and opinions. Fernandez et al (2014) say this creates an innovative opportunity for governments to learn about their citizens and to engage with them more effectively. Paris and Wan (2011) also add that accurate impressions of what publics think about vis-à-vis particular products, issues or topics can be established from the use of ubiquitous social media.

Taylor et al (2001) advance that the ability to engage in active dialogue with one's public is important to having an effective online presence. This is because individuals often express their opinions on social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook during public events (Hu et al, 2013). However, Maben and Gearhart (2018) argue that relatively little research has been conducted around online listening. Others say, "listening has not been given sufficient consideration as a significant practice of intimacy, connection, obligation and participation online; instead, it has often been considered as contributing little value to online communities" (Crawford, 2009: 527).

Consequently, Powell et al (2016) present the concept of social listening which they define as the process of learning from public conversations on the Internet. They argue that social listening is an important tool to augment the post-marketing safety surveillance process. Additionally, they say social listening also offers additional data not traditionally seen with existing data sources, such as benefit discussions. Social listening is "an active process of attending to, observing, interpreting, and responding to a variety of stimuli through mediated, electronic, and social channels" (Stewart and Arnold 2018: 86). Stewart and Arnold (2018) assert that social listening emerges in how we communicate and listen to others using the domain of social media and communication technologies which influence our interpersonal engagement. Social listening occurs in a variety of contexts including, but not limited to, interpersonal messaging on digital applications, online social networking sites, and messaging on mobile devices.

Macnamara (2013) states that in online Web 2.0 enabled social media and networks, listening is demonstrated in several unique ways such as posting comments, liking Facebook pages, following and re-tweeting on Twitter, voting in some sites, tagging, bookmarking, subscribing and even in lurking. Macnamara (2013) further adds that once an audience is in place to potentially pay attention, give recognition, understand, and respond to a speaker or speakers, the performance of listening ensues. Also, listening requires negotiation of silence, questions, and argumentation, dealing with difference, and acceptance of the risk of one's own views being challenged or even proved wrong leading to what Bickford (1996) calls courageous listening.

"Recent political theory in the area of deliberative democracy has placed listening at the normative core of meaningfully democratic deliberation" (Scudder, 2021: 1). Thus, this concept of democratic listening is useful to this thesis because the quality of participants' listening directly impacts the quality of their deliberation. Deliberation is important because it enhances "the epistemic, ethical, and democratic value of a decision-making process" (Scudder, 2021: 2).

In sum, the concept of democratic listening is thus useful to this thesis in the following ways, "listening brings democracy to life. Listening avoids unnecessary conflicts that arise due to misunderstandings. And listening helps resolve real conflicts when there are genuine disagreements on co-op policy. Listening not only contributes to smooth functioning, but also to innovation; it encourages new ideas and helps us makes good use of them. Listening not only makes democracy work; it infuses it with a climate of mutual regard, comfort, and pleasure in working together" (Caspary, 2021: 1).

Conclusion:

"The Internet is a key enabler to accessing relevant information on the citizens' health and wellbeing, which is fundamental to the country's socio-economic development. The Internet should therefore be accessible by everyone through affordable accessible data fees as opposed to being a privilege for the rich while excluding the generality of the citizens, the vulnerable and marginalised communities" (MISA Zimbabwe, 2020: 1). Jha and Kodila-Tedika (2020) find that the relationship between social media and democracy remains robust when Internet penetration matches the adoption of communication technologies.

In Zimbabwe, Moyo (2020) suggests that the increased use of social media has failed to produce a robust and vibrant public sphere due to the intractable digital divide. Moyo (2020) does acknowledge that social media has broadened free speech and pluralized interactive spaces in poor societies. Yet, the democratic and social divide have effectively undermined the emergence of a public sphere that is characterized by rational and critical argument. The democratic divide is the gap that exists between "those who do, and do not use the panoply of digital resources to engage, mobilize and participate in public life" (Norris, 2001: 13). Whereas the social divide is the difference in access to social media between various social groups due to sociodemographic factors such as class, income, education, gender, age, race, ethnicity, and even caste (Norris, 2001; Langran, 2011).

In Zimbabwe, many citizens now enjoy access to the burgeoning Twittersphere though the benefits of critical engagement reminiscent of the Habermasian public sphere appear to be in doubt for certain classes. Moyo (2020) states that social media in Zimbabwe has created a cosmopolitan online public sphere which is characterized by a middle-class monologue on social change and dyslectic civic virtue by the poor. Curran argues this is so because "emollient generalizations about the empowering technology of the internet often fail to consider [such] powerful democratic divide influences in the real world that can keep people disempowered [even with a computer mouse or mobile phone in their hands]"

(2012: 15). Hence, Moyo (2020) construes that the Zimbabwean Twittersphere is undermined by the intractable democratic divide. Participation by the poor is undermined by a combined effect of weak critical (media) literacies and a poor sense of civic virtue and responsibility. These digital inequalities risk rendering listening inconsequential and ineffective if they remain unaddressed. Ragnedda and Gladkova (2020) add that such inequalities in the way citizens' access and use the Internet are also related to the inequalities in tangible outcomes and social rewards which further reinforces social inequalities. Thus, in the Global South strong forms of inequalities which exist in terms of technological access such as accessing and using the Internet are related to the main axis of social inequalities such as gender, income, education, and age.

Shahbaz and Funk (2019) assert that Internet freedoms are increasingly jeopardized by the tools and tactics of digital authoritarianism rapidly spreading across the globe. "Repressive regimes, elected incumbents with authoritarian ambitions and unscrupulous partisan operatives have exploited the unregulated spaces of social media platforms, converting them into instruments for political distortion and societal control" (Shahbaz and Funk, 2019: 1). Governments across the world are also deploying advanced tools to identify and monitor users on an immense scale. As a result of these trends, global Internet freedom declined for the ninth consecutive year in 2019. Shahbaz and Funk (2019) state that digital platforms are the new battleground for democracy. Therefore, shaping the flow of information on the Internet is now an essential strategy for those seeking to disrupt the democratic transfer of power through elections. Shahbaz and Funk (2019) recommend that civil society should educate voters about how to spot political disinformation and flag misleading content on social media, particularly on private messaging platforms. The civil society should also work with scholars, human rights lawyers, and other stakeholders to investigate the use of social media surveillance tools and their impact on targeted communities, particularly marginalized groups.

In sum, this chapter maintains that listening is a vital democratic requirement. In Zimbabwe, good listening can help achieve democratic objectives such as "enhancing legitimacy, helping to deal with deep disagreements, improving understanding and increasing empowerment" (Dobson, 2012: 843). The relationship between social media and democracy has become even more important in the wake of the current reversal in democratic trend across the world. Social media and the Internet strengthen democracy by positively influencing the capability of citizens to communicate information with the governments. They also promote transparency and accountability by enabling

citizens to report and expose wrongdoings. Additionally, Jha and Kodila-Tedika (2020) say that social media can be utilized by civil society actors to reach a larger audience to mobilize protests on unconstitutional actions by governments that weaken the democratic freedom of citizens.

In the next chapter, the methods involved in gathering the data that were used for this present research are outlined. Social media is part of our everyday life and the platforms studied in this study offer a large repository of data that is used to understand various phenomena. In this study the phenomena the research seeks to understand is the role social media plays in influencing democratization processes.

CHAPTER 5

Research Methodology – Methods and Procedures.

Introduction – Social Media Research:

"Research methodology is the path through which researchers need to conduct their research" (Sileyew, 2019: 2). In this path, researchers formulate their problems and objectives and subsequently present the results from the data obtained during the study period. Thus, a study's research design provides an appropriate framework for the study which involves many interrelated decisions.

The present research locates itself within digital methods that incorporate qualitative research methods. Creswell and Creswell (2017) state that qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The term digital methods seek to "capture a recent development in Internet-related research, summarized as approaches to the web as data set. Joining a larger computational turn in the social sciences and the digital humanities, it asks a series of questions about the quality of web data, the productivity of online collection and analytical methods, and ultimately the prospects of having the web serve as a site for grounding findings" (Rogers, 2015: 1). 'Digital methods' is also increasingly employed as an umbrella term for tool-based methods employed in the digital humanities and e-social sciences. Thus, it is a technique for the study of societal change and cultural condition with online data by making use of available digital objects such as the like, share, and retweet buttons.

This chapter presents the research design for the present study to answer its broader research questions in a way that Kumar (2019) describes as valid, objective, accurate, and economic. The analysed data is gathered from the digital engagements by Zimbabwean citizens on Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp groups. This chapter will provide full descriptions of the methodological approaches used for social media research with the three findings chapters (6 for Twitter, 7 for Facebook, and 8 for WhatsApp group(s) additionally providing brief outlines of the methods for each social media network before proceeding to share the findings. The challenges and limitations that typically occur when conducting research on social media are highlighted and discussed since they also influence the research design. In the succeeding sections on this chapter, the processes undertaken when gathering data from Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp are detailed in full.

Parker et al (2011) suggest that social media is an emerging area of enquiry for social informaticians. Social informatics is the "interdisciplinary study of the design, uses, and consequences of information technologies that takes into account their interaction with institutional and cultural contexts" (Kling, 2000: 218). Edwards et al (2013) add that the technological innovations in digital communications have provoked new opportunities and challenges for social research. Ngai et al (2015) argue that social media have considerably altered the ways in which most people, communities, and organizations communicate and interact. For McCay-Peet and Quan-Haase (2017) social media has become an integral part of everyday life with large economic, political, and societal implications. Thus, the Web 2.0 technologies (social media) generate new forms of data which are of significance for social research as well as new methods and techniques for analysing this kind of data. They also allow relationship forming between users from distinct backgrounds, resulting in a "tenacious social structure" (Kapoor et al, 2018: 531) which generates considerable amounts of information. These large amounts of information have since attracted substantial attention from researchers. The user generated content from social media encourages research from scholars across various fields (Kapoor et al, 2018) due to their pervasiveness and cultural impacts (Filo et al, 2015).

Filo et al (2015) also state that consumers interact with social media during multiple stages of the consumption process including information search, decision-making, word of mouth, and the acquisition, use, and disposal of products and services. Social media hold vast quantities of naturally occurring data on any number of topics, from consumer behaviours to attitudes towards pro-environmental policies, to political views and preferences (Townsend and Wallace, 2016).

However, Sloan and Quan-Haase (2017) argue that social media studies require a reorientation of how we think about the data and its relationship with the social world. They reason that the role of social media data in academic work is incidental because as much as the data exists and proliferates whether it is observed or not, it is not created solely for the purpose of research. Nevertheless, this cannot diminish from its value in recording and shedding light on a whole range of social phenomena including attitudes, intentions, identity, networks, opinions, locations, and representations. Therefore, in social media research we must embrace Quan-Haase and McCay-Peet's (2017) 'interdisciplinary approach' which draws on the methodological traditions from across and outside of the social sciences, computer sciences, and humanities.

The interdisciplinary approach is particularly critical for social media studies because social media is relevant to many disciplines. Social media produces large volumes of data with a high velocity which is diverse in variety and has fine-grained resolution. This data is also relational in nature, exhaustive in scope, and allows for flexibility in its approach and is referred to as 'big data' (Kitchin, 2014). Mills (2018) argues that there are almost as many definitions of big data as there are theorists but there is agreement that big data are diverse, complex, and massive in scale. Hence, their requiring specialized analytic tools and technologies to capture, process, and reveal insights in a timely way (Hashem et al, 2015). "Common types of big data can include traces of human activity captured on social media, learning analytics, business and operational data, web and mobile analytics, streaming data, commercial and government data, and sensory data from the Internet of Things or IoT" (Mills, 2018: 11).

Given the growing pervasiveness and impact of social media on a broad range of social phenomena including politics, presentation of self, social interaction, social movements, and scholarship itself, big data have become a fruitful area of research as well as a promising arena for data collection. Mellon and Prosser (2017) advance that in political research the use of social media big data has expanded rapidly in attempts to forecast elections, study online deliberation, political mobilization, and political ideology.

In studying social media, the dominant research methods have traditionally been quantitative user surveys and quantitative content analyses. Parker et al (2011) acknowledge that this is useful research however, the discourse by people using social media presents many opportunities for social informaticians who wish to engage in qualitative analysis. Romano et al (2003) declare that such discourse can provide richer insights into people's viewpoints, feelings, attitudes, and intentions than directive questions in surveys and focus groups especially for consumer researchers. In qualitative content analysis Snelson (2016) says that researchers use Facebook posts, Tweets and hashtags, YouTube videos, and other social media content as data sources. This has led to Lomborg and Bechmann (2014) arguing that social media research will benefit from social media companies making data available to researchers through their application programming interfaces (APIs). An API is a "back-end interface through which third-party developers may connect new add-ons to an existing service. The API is also an interface for researchers to collect data off a given social media service for empirical analysis" (Lomborg and Bechmann, 2014: 256).

In politics, social media has been used to study political and social phenomena such as election forecasting and the tracking of political conversations. Mellon

and Prosser (2017) say that social media research in politics has expanded rapidly with studies using data from Twitter and Facebook to study online deliberations, political mobilization, and ideology. Other scholars (Gil de Zuniga et al, 2012) have tested how digital media use for informational purposes similarly contributes to foster democratic processes and the creation of social capital.

As such, in this Chapter the qualitative research methods best suited for investigating the effects of social media on democracy in Africa are presented and discussed.

The Research Design:

"Research designs are types of inquiry within qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches that provide specific direction for procedures in a research study" (Creswell and Creswell, 2017: 49). Hence, the research design refers to the overall strategy that is chosen to integrate the different components of the study in a coherent and logical way. This ensures that a research problem is effectively addressed and constitutes the blueprint for the collection, measurement, and analysis of data. Once the research problem is effectively addressed, the conclusion will then be used to measure the validity of the research.

In this present research, the overall strategy is to gather data from Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp using various applications or analytics tools in the pursuit of valid, objective, and accurate data. Armed with this reliable data the next step has been to qualitatively analyse the content.

Qualitative Content Analysis:

Qualitative research is a group of approaches for the collection and analysis of data with the aim to provide an in-depth, socio-contextual, and detailed description and interpretation of a research topic (Vaismoradi et al, 2016). Leavy (2017) adds that qualitative research is generally characterized by inductive approaches to knowledge building aimed at generating meaning. "Researchers use this approach to explore; to robustly investigate and learn about social phenomenon; to unpack the meanings people ascribe to activities, situations, events, or artefacts; or to build a depth of understanding about some dimension of social life" (Leavy, 2017: 9).

The present research uses content analysis which is a widely used qualitative research technique. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) point out that a summative content analysis involves counting and comparisons of keywords or content which is followed by the interpretation of the underlying context. Elo and Kyngas

(2008) add that content analysis is used for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context, with the purpose of providing knowledge, new insights, a representation of facts and a practical guide to action. Accordingly, content analysis is a systematic and objective means of describing and quantifying phenomena which allows a researcher to test theoretical issues to enhance understanding of the data. Content analysis may be used with either qualitative or quantitative data. The purpose of a study usually determines which of the two is applied.

Qualitative content analysis is one of numerous research methods used to analyse textual data. Research using qualitative content analysis focuses on the characteristics of language as communication with attention to the content or contextual meaning of the texts (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). Thus, "the object of (qualitative) content analysis can be all sort of recorded communication (transcripts of interviews, discourses, protocols of observations, video tapes, documents ...)" (Mayring, 2004: 2). Elo et al (2014) advance that a prerequisite for a successful qualitative content analysis is such that the data can be reduced to concepts that describe the research phenomenon by creating categories, concepts, a model, conceptual system, or a conceptual map. This can be realised by applying qualitative content analysis on a case study.

The Case Study approach:

A case study is an "empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 1994: 13). Gerring (2006) adds that a case study may be understood as the intensive study of a single case where the purpose of that study is to shed light on a larger class of cases. Case studies are widely used in organizational studies and across the social sciences (Kohlbacher, 2006), they are particularly useful to apply when seeking to obtain an in-depth appreciation of an issue, event, or phenomenon of interest – in its natural real-life context (Crowe et al, 2011). Case study research is grounded in deep and varied sources of information meaning they are richly descriptive. Case studies divulge quotes from key participants, anecdotes, and prose composed from interviews. For Hancock and Algozzine (2017) these and other literary techniques create mental images that bring to life the complexity of the many variables inherent in the phenomenon being studied. Thus, the insights drawn from case studies can directly influence policy, procedures, and future research according to Merriam (1998).

Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2001) identify at least three advantages of case study research which make it a reliable research method. Case studies help us understand complex inter-relationships, are grounded in lived reality, and facilitate the exploration of the unexpected and unusual. Multiple case studies enable research to focus on the significance of the idiosyncratic and facilitate rich conceptual or theoretical development. Finally, case studies show the processes involved in causal relationships.

Nevertheless, like all research methods case also have limitations. Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2001) argue that in case study research there can be too much data for analysis which can be very expensive, if attempted on a large scale. In case studies, the complexity examined is difficult to re-present simply as they do not lend themselves to numerical representation. Case studies are also not generalizable in the conventional sense. They cannot answer many relevant and appropriate research questions. They are strongest when researcher expertise and intuition are maximised, but this raises doubts about their objectivity. Lastly, Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2001) add that sometimes case studies are easy to dismiss particularly by those who do not like the messages that they contain.

The present research also adds an ethnographical approach to the case study method since it lends itself well to capturing information on more explanatory 'how', 'what' and 'why' questions. Ethnography is an approach for studying everyday life as lived by groups of people. In this research, in the case study chosen – Zimbabwe – the exploration of what conversations occur in a WhatsApp group is investigated through the assumption of an ethnographic position to gather data.

Ethnography:

Some scholars disagree on what counts as ethnographic as the term does not seem to imply any single method of type of data analysis. In German-speaking countries Luders (2004) argues that ethnography has only recently begun to replace the term 'participant observation' and this is due to the influence of British and American scholarship. Despite this, Singer (2009) suggests that everyone can probably agree that it involves what Lindlof (2009) calls a holistic description of cultural membership. The present study recognises that ethnographic research is relevant for "communication researchers and those inhabiting a loose coalition of computer science sub-disciplines, including human-computer interaction, computer-supported collaborative work, computer-supported collaborative learning, and ubiquitous computing" (Boellstorff et al, 2012: 3).

In terms of data collection, “ethnography usually involves the researcher participating, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts – in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry” (Atkinson and Hammersley, 2007: 3). In conducting ethnographic research, people’s actions and accounts are studied in everyday contexts, rather than under conditions created by a researcher such as in experimental setups or in highly structured interview situations.

Postill and Pink (2012) state that social media practices and technologies are often a part of how ethnographic researchers navigate the wider social, material, and technological worlds. Caliandro (2018) argues that with the widespread diffusion of social media, the Internet has become more and more incorporated into the everyday practices of people as well as into those of social researchers. For ethnographers “it is no longer imaginable to conduct ethnography without considering online spaces” (Hallett and Barber, 2014: 307). Thus, various styles of online ethnography have since been developed such as Internet ethnography (Miller and Slater, 2000), cyber-ethnography (Arturo, 1994), expanded ethnography (Beneito Montagut, 2011) and ethnography of the virtual worlds (Boellstorff et al, 2012) among others.

In the everyday life of a social media ethnographer, they live part of their life on the Internet, keeping up to date with, and participating and collaborating in social media discussions. Postill and Pink (2012) also add that by conducting social media research five overlapping sub-practices or routines ensue – catching up, sharing, exploring, interacting, and archiving. These routines became part of how a digital ethnographer in their approach to studying digital communication produces knowledge.

Underberg and Zorn (2013) say that digital ethnography can be understood as a method for representing real-life cultures through storytelling in digital media. Masten and Plowman (2003) argue that digital ethnography is the modern, digital equivalent of traditional, Malinowskian ethnographic forms. They distinguish traditional ethnography from digital ethnography by that the former involves physically immersing in distinct places and cultures. Digital ethnography capitalizes “on wired and wireless technologies to extend classic ethnographic methods, like participant observation, beyond geographic, as well as temporal, boundaries” (Masten and Plowman, 2003: 77). In digital ethnography, participants communicate their experience via the Internet and other digital technologies. Digital ethnographers then gather these details, in the form of

words, images, or audio files, and thus determine their significance as they are played out in the context of the participants' lives (Masten and Plowman, 2003).

After using an ethnographical approach, the data gathering would be incomplete without coding, a ubiquitous part of the qualitative research process. The researcher uses ethnography in the study of a Zimbabwean WhatsApp group to investigate what deliberations occur particularly during an election period. Elliott (2018) says that coding is an almost universal process in qualitative research as it is a fundamental aspect of the analytical process and the ways in which researchers break down their data to make something new. Thus, coding is "the process of analysing qualitative text data by taking them apart to see what they yield before putting the data back together in a meaningful way" (Creswell and Báez, 2020: 156).

Coding:

Holton (2007) advances that the essential relationship between data and theory is a conceptual code. Coding gets the researcher off the empirical level by fracturing the data, then conceptualizing the underlying pattern of a set of empirical indicators within the data as a theory that explains what is happening in the data.

Coding gives the researcher a condensed, abstract view with scope and dimension that encompasses otherwise seemingly disparate phenomena. This is essential since Basit (2003) argues that data analysis is the most difficult and most crucial aspect of qualitative research. In the present study, data which consisted of posts, videos and pictures was collected from Twitter and Facebook which was then coded. On Twitter, trending hashtags in the run up to the elections, during elections and just after elections are used in the present research as coding units. These hashtags are #ElectionsZW, #Zimbabwe, #ZimbabweDecides, #EDPfee, and #GodIsInIt. On Facebook, the present research employs thematic analysis (coding). This is a type of qualitative data analysis that finds themes in text by analysing the meaning of words and sentence structure. After all, thematic analysis "is a method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes') within qualitative data" (Clarke et al, 2015: 1).

Therefore, coding is one of the significant steps taken during analysis to organize and make sense of textual data. However, the gathering of such textual data poses 'important ethical concerns' (Townsend and Wallace, 2016). Thus, in the next section the ethics of social media research are explored.

Research Ethics for Social Media:

First and foremost, as Moreno et al (2013) indicate, confidentiality is key to all social media research. Social media researchers have the dual mission to generate knowledge through rigorous research and to also uphold ethical standards and principles. Thus, researchers must balance the rights of subjects with the benefits and rights to research whenever they make ethical decisions. Ethical decision-making itself is a deliberative process where researchers should consult as many people and resources as possible. Markham and Buchanan, (2012) say those that are consulted must include fellow researchers, people participating in or familiar with the contexts or sites being studied, research review boards, ethics guidelines, published scholarship and, where applicable, legal precedent.

Since the advent of the internet, there is little to no research that is not impacted in some way or the other by the World Wide Web. However, the internet as a field, a tool, and a venue has specific and far-reaching ethical issues. Buchanan and Zimmer (2012) state that Internet research ethics which are related to computer and information ethics include ethical issues around participant knowledge, consent, data privacy, security, confidentiality, integrity of data and intellectual property issues. Thus, Bender et al (2017) argues that many forms of Internet-based research are ethically challenging because of the blurred public and private boundaries of online spaces. The dynamic and interactive nature of the media and the ease with which sensitive data can be accessed, shared, hacked, and/or replicated is thus a cause for concern.

However, Townsend and Wallace (2016) submit that there is still no clear ethical framework for researchers entering the field of increasing social media research. Publics continue to progressively use social media to share attitudes and behaviours on a wide variety of topics and this offers a wealth of information for researchers which is available at the click of a button. Moreover, this data, which is rich, plentiful, and naturally occurring is already public on social media platforms. Despite this, Zwitter (2014) says that no user considers or is under the impression that they will be the subject of research in Twitter or Facebook studies when using social media. This dilemma has prompted Townsend and Wallace (2016) to present the key areas of concern within social media research.

The first area of concern is the ‘Private versus Public’ debate which is one of the biggest areas of concern with social media data in terms of whether such data should be considered public or private data. Townsend and Wallace (2016) say the key to this argument is the position that social media users have all agreed

to a set of terms and conditions for each social media platform that they use. The terms and conditions contain clauses which state how one's data may be accessed by third parties (including researchers).

Consequently, if users agree to these terms and conditions then their data is in the public domain. However, boyd and Crawford (2012) argue that this is problematic as researchers justify their actions as ethical simply because the data are accessible. Thus, the British Psychological Society (2013) posit that questions of whether online postings are public or private are determined to some extent by the online setting itself, and whether there is a reasonable expectation of privacy on behalf of the social media user. In this regard, a password protected 'private' Facebook group can be considered private, whereas an open discussion on Twitter in which people broadcast their opinions using a hashtag can be considered public. In sum, Townsend, and Wallace (2016) say questions of whether the data is public or private relate to the extent to which we are ethically bound to seek informed consent from social media users. Informed consent is another key area of concern in social media research.

"Informed consent is a critical component of the ethics of all types of research" (Townsend and Wallace, 2016: 6). In social media-based research this presents problems because in most instances, a social media user's data is accessed and analysed without informed consent having first been sought. Despite this, Townsend, and Wallace (2016) argue that acquiring informed consent becomes problematic when the data set is big. This can seem virtually impossible in aggregate data containing thousands or even hundreds of thousands of data units. Hence, when working with social media data there will be some conditions in which researchers will be more ethically bound to seek informed consent, such as when accessing data which social media users consider private.

The next area of concern is anonymity which is a key consideration in research ethics particularly in qualitative research practices where data sets are shared outside of the original research team. Townsend and Wallace (2016) argue that in traditional forms of research it is generally straightforward to anonymise data. However, when working with social media data anonymising this data is more complex. Narayanan and Shmatikov (2009) argue that anonymisation procedures are still evolving for big data and it is difficult to anonymise individual data extracts – particularly tweets – when these are reproduced in publications and during presentations.

Protecting the identity of unwitting participants is much more important when the data accessed refers to sensitive subject matter, especially in politics. When

such identities and data are exposed to authoritarian regimes this places a social media user at potential risk to harm. Accordingly, where data deals with sensitive subjects, a researcher must revisit other concerns to ensure that confidentiality and anonymity have been adequately protected. The researcher must also consider whether it is prudent to seek informed consent.

The present study adhered to these precepts of ethics put forward by Townsend and Wallace (2016) when conducting the research on the influence social media on democracy in Africa. Prominence was placed on informed consent which is one of the most basic and fundamental concepts of traditional research. Also, the Centre for Film and Studies (CFMS) Ethics Committee granted the researcher ethical clearance to pursue this study. Furthermore, the present research anonymised the names of social media users on Twitter and Facebook to protect them from harm by the Zimbabwean government and political opponents. The identities of politicians and prominent political commentators were not anonymised including those of users who used pseudonyms. In the WhatsApp research, the identifiable information such as cellphone numbers were removed from the data sets to protect the users of the platform.

The Challenge of Big Data:

Sagiroglu and Sinanc (2013) posit that big data and its analysis are at the centre of modern science and business. “Big data is generated from an increasing plurality of sources, including Internet clicks, mobile transactions, user-generated content, and social media as well as purposefully generated content through sensor networks or business transactions such as sales queries and purchase transactions” (George et al, 2014: 321). As these data stored in databases continuously increase, Sagiroglu and Sinanc (2013) say they become difficult to capture, form, store, manage, share, analyse and visualize via typical database software tools. Hence, George et al (2014) assert that these data require the use of powerful computational techniques to unveil trends and patterns within and between these extremely large socioeconomic datasets.

Since data sources produce staggering amounts of raw data, Labrinidis and Jagadish (2012) argue that much of this data is of no interest, and it can be filtered and compressed by orders of magnitude. Thus, the challenge is to define these filters in such a way that they do not discard useful information. Labrinidis and Jagadish (2012) say that another challenge is how to automatically generate the right metadata to describe what data is recorded and how it is recorded and measured. This metadata is likely to be crucial to downstream analysis.

The present research was faced with the challenge of having to go through lots of tweets and Facebook posts when conducting the study. Thus, to avoid wasting time and going through all the data with most of it being of no interest research filters were defined to avoid discarding useful information. The use of standard information retrieval systems (Twitonomy and Netvizz) was then employed. These systems enabled the searching and processing of large volumes of data in a reasonable time. The ensuing sections about the gathering of data from Twitter and Facebook describe how the two information retrieval systems – Twitonomy and Netvizz – were used to deal with big data.

Data Gathering on Twitter:

In gathering data on platforms such as Twitter and WhatsApp the ideal technique to use is text mining which enables for the searching and retrieval of text data for analysis. Text mining involves applying a text mining tool to large collections of documents that contain written words such as social media posts, advertisements, or emails (Mills,2018).

Twitter is a popular research source as it is free to access and is relatively easy to download data from, despite various challenges associated with the nature of this data, as outlined further below. Bruns (2019) emphasises that social media research is proving to be a particularly fertile field as it continuously builds on increasingly large datasets, gathered through the Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) of leading platforms such as Twitter and Facebook.

Fiesler and Proferes (2018) acknowledge that social computing systems such as Twitter present new research sites which provide billions of data points to researchers. Although the availability of this public data poses ethical challenges, Twitter's Privacy Policy (2020) [14]mentions that academics may use tweets as part of research. This means that researchers who use data sets of tweets do not gain consent from each Twitter user nor are users typically given notice by the researcher. Twitter – as a microblogging and social networking service – say that they believe in the value of an open exchange of information. Consequently, they claim to be committed to providing academic researchers unparalleled access to their public conversational data. Twitter argues that if it exists, it has probably been talked about on Twitter whether it is the humanities, social and political sciences, psychology, data, or computer sciences. This makes Twitter data a powerful resource across all academic disciplines. The product offerings

[14] "Whether you're a graduate student writing a thesis, or a principal investigator at a research lab, the Twitter API can help you to secure millions of public conversation historical and real-time data points" (Developer Twitter, 2021: 1).

by Twitter for academic researchers range from free and publicly available data to enterprise level access.

The present research used free and publicly available data which was gathered by textually mining the platform using the application Twitonomy. The coding utilized hashtags which trended during the electoral period such as #ElectionsZW, #Zimbabwe, #ZimbabweDecides, #EDPfee, and #GodIsInIt. Rayson (2014) describes Twitonomy as an analytics tool that has features that help to monitor, manage, track, and optimize activities on Twitter. Twitonomy was developed precisely for Twitter research, and it offers detailed and visualised analytics of tweets and hashtags. Twitonomy also tracks the retweets, likes, and shares. It provides users with features such as detailed analytics for any user, search analytics, tweet monitoring, and actionable insights through robust reporting. Morrish (2019) also adds that Twitonomy can be used to observe a specific account's activity to quickly identify signs of suspicious behaviour. Although it will not conclusively determine if an account is a bot, Twitonomy can highlight major signs of inauthentic or automated behaviour to investigate further.

Aside from the hashtags used to mine textual data, the study also used Twitonomy to study those Twitter accounts belonging to politicians, various civil society groupings and prominent political and elections critics. The Twitter accounts selected for analysis were @ProfJNMoyo, @CatrionaLaing1, @edmnangagwa, @nelsonchamisa, @nickmangwana, @PacheduZW and @Wamagaisa. These accounts provided the most commentary during the electoral period and commanded a large following from Zimbabwean Twitter users. They were chosen for analysis for the present research because of the rich, real-time, and concrete data they generated during political deliberations online. However, not all the tweets from these accounts were used for the present research, the ones the information retrieval systems recovered were sufficient to draw tangible conclusions from.

To illustrate how Twitonomy presents detailed analytics of tweets and hashtags the present research uses the hashtag #Chamisa and Twitter account @ProfJNMoyo as examples. The images of these analytics are found in the findings Chapter (6) which detail the results and deductions derived from Twitter when Twitonomy was applied.

#Chamisa

On 29 August 2018, Twitonomy was used to search for the trending hashtag #Chamisa. The unveiled detailed analytics for #Chamisa displayed 901 tweets

between 18 August 2018 to 29 August 2018 which used the hashtag. The 901 tweets were sent out by 659 users. The potential reach (other users who possibly saw the tweets) was an estimated 6 347 589 users. The most influential #Chamisa user was South Africa's Eyewitness News (@ewnupdates) which had 869 864 followers. The most engaging user was one of Zimbabwe's independent newspaper publications Daily News (@DailyNewsZim) which had 220 788 followers. The most active user was Kudzai Neshanje (@KNeshanje) who had 729 followers. The top language used was English. The most retweeted tweet was retweeted 63 times with the most favourited tweet favourited 170 times.

@ProfJNMoyo

On 29 August 2018, Twitonomy was used to search the @ProfJNMoyo Twitter account which is a verified Twitter account belonging to Zimbabwe's former Minister of Higher and Tertiary Education, Science & Technology Development, Professor Jonathan Moyo.

The detailed Twitonomy analytics displayed that @ProfJNMoyo joined Twitter on 9 February 2015 as user number 3026140439. @ProfJNMoyo's 'bio' [15] displayed that the account had sent out 27 418 tweets. @ProfJNMoyo followed 369 Twitter accounts and 370 704 Twitter accounts followed @ProfJNMoyo. @ProfJNMoyo tweeted 3 188 tweets from 30 June 2017 to 29 August 2018 at an average of 7.48 tweets per day.

@ProfJNMoyo retweeted @ZBCNewsonline the most at 21 times. @ProfJNMoyo also replied to himself the most at 337 times because in responding to tweets sent to him, @ProfJNMoyo replied to tweets that tagged him. The most mentioned user by @ProfJNMoyo was @ZECzim at 102 times, and @ProfJNMoyo used the hashtag #kwekwehimjuly30 the most at 136 times. @ProfJNMoyo's most retweeted tweet had 1339 retweets and the most favourited tweet was favourited 3494 times. Other statistics revealed by the Twitonomy analytics are the days of the week and hours of the day @ProfJNMoyo was logged onto Twitter. Twitonomy also displayed the operating systems from which the account tweeted from – in @ProfJNMoyo's case it was Android at 3180 times.

Data Gathering on Facebook:

Since its creation in February 2004, Facebook has become a spectacular success by creating a massive new realm in which billions of social interactions are played out every day. This has led to Wilson et al remarking that, "the sheer

[15] A 'bio' short for biography on social media is a condensed description of a person's life. It usually involves just the basic facts like education, work, relationships, and interests.

online ubiquity of Facebook is astounding" (2012: 203). The activities performed on Facebook – connecting to others, expressing preferences, providing status updates – leave a wealth of concrete and observable data in their wake. Ellison et al (2007) posit that the Facebook is popular with researchers because of its heavy usage patterns and its technological capabilities which allow for the bridging of online and offline relationships. Wilson et al (2012) add that Facebook now provides many new opportunities for studying human behaviour that previously had to rely on behaviours that were difficult to assess such as making friends and chatting.

In Africa, Essoungou (2019) asserts that Facebook has kept important political conversations at the forefront, this makes the platform requisite in the study of democratization processes in the continent.

The present research used the now defunct Netvizz for textually mining Facebook for data. Netvizz was a free data collection and extraction application that allowed researchers to export data in standard file formats from different sections of Facebook. Thus, in using Netvizz, Rieder (2013) states that friendship networks, groups and pages can be analysed quantitatively and qualitatively using demographical, post-demographical, and relational characteristics. The present research used Netvizz to extract and collect data from Zimbabwean Facebook pages which are overtly political.

The Facebook pages are split among those that belong to the main political protagonists – Emmerson Mnangagwa and Nelson Chamisa – and those that belong to civil society activists and pressure groups. These Facebook Pages can be seen in the table 1.0 below.

Table 1.0.

ZANU-PF	MDC-Alliance	Civil Society
Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa	Advocate Nelson Chamisa	Open Parly ZW
ED Mnangagwa Supporters	MDC Alliance	Elections Support Network (ZESN)
ZANU-PF 2018	MDC Zimbabwe	Zimbabwe Yadzoka Mayibuye iZimbabwe
ZANU-PF Supporters Network	Nelson Chamisa: MDC-T President Page	Road to Zimbabwe Elections 2018
ZANU-PF UK		Zimbabwe Election 2018
		Zimbabwe Election Watch 2018

The data extraction and collection tool, Netvizz, was used on 31 August 2018 on the named Facebook pages. The detailed analysis and visual presentations are found in the Facebook findings Chapter (7). To illustrate how Netvizz presents data, the present research uses the Facebook pages of Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa and Advocate Nelson Chamisa as examples.

Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa

Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa was created on 24 October 2014 and on the day of data extraction and collection was liked by approximately 450 000 Facebook users. The highest number of comments recorded on the Page was 12 612, generated from 8 Facebook posts on 3 August 2018. The 8 posts also recorded a combined 12 349 Likes, 14 301 reactions, and 1 302 shares.

Advocate Nelson Chamisa

Advocate Nelson Chamisa was created on 07 October 2012 and on the day of data extraction and collection was liked by approximately 144 000 Facebook users. The highest number of comments recorded was 3 372, generated from 3 Facebook Live videos streamed on the page on 28 July 2018. The 3 Facebook Live videos generated 1 894 Likes, 2 547 reactions and 243 shares. Facebook Live is a video feature on Facebook that allows people, public figures, and Pages to share live videos with their followers and friends on Facebook.

Data Gathering on WhatsApp Messenger:

Ngaleka and Uys (2013) state that WhatsApp is a free synchronous messaging application that can be used to send and receive instant messages between individuals and in groups. As a cross-platform application, WhatsApp works mainly on smartphones and most Android devices.

In Africa, Cheeseman et al (2020) argue that WhatsApp – owned by Facebook – has become the default mode of telecommunication. WhatsApp's disruptive capability has become highly valued by opposition parties and civil society groups in Africa's cutthroat politics. WhatsApp's end-to-end encryption makes it attractive to activists trying to evade government restrictions in authoritarian regimes.

WhatsApp Groups:

A popular function of WhatsApp is its ability to host groups. These groups facilitate the dissemination of different types of content including chain messages and news to large numbers of people in an instant. The groups are unstructured spaces where participants also share voice messages, photos, and videos with all participants at once. Unstructured conversations are the most usual form of conversation in a group chat. Thus, "in a group chat, anybody can propose a discussion or start a new discussion in response to a piece of content or join an existing discussion at any time and any depth" (Caetano et al, 2019: 28). Conversations in groups allow users to chat and interact instantly with all those who join the group. However, the visibility of these conversations is restricted to members of the group. A group administrator controls admission to a group and thus decides who can join a group. Resende et al (2019) advance that access to a group can be effectively made public if the group administrator shares a joining link on other sites such as email and social media like Facebook and Twitter.

WhatsApp in Zimbabwe:

In Zimbabwe, WhatsApp connections comprise of almost half of all Internet usage although the Internet penetration rate is at a modest 50%. To put this into context, Zimbabwe has an estimated population of over 16 million people, and the mobile penetration rate is understood to be at 100%. Thomas (2019) says that as the information landscape shifts to social platforms, Zimbabwe's independent media are increasingly fluctuating to WhatsApp as a primary distributor of news. Some of the notable WhatsApp groups that distribute news

via WhatsApp are 263Chat, Kukurigo Updates, Centre for Innovation and Technology (CITE), and Magamba Network.

WhatsApp is so popular in Zimbabwe that when Mnangagwa became president he created a broadcast list to connect with Zimbabwean citizens. Mnangagwa published the WhatsApp number (+263) 776 910 469 (IOL, 2018) where those who wished to join and engage him had to message. The initiative did not yield any results and was soon forgotten. Most citizens favoured expressing themselves politically on Twitter and Facebook as the sites could provide anonymity when required.

263Chat WhatsApp Group:

The present study uses the 263Chat WhatsApp group for the purposes of research in this study. 263Chat is a public WhatsApp group that is accessible to any user with a valid URL invite. 263Chat facilitates open group chats which allow participants to share and respond to messages sent out by the 263Chat administrator. Thomas (2019) says that since November 2017, 263Chat has been circulating a daily e-paper which compiles news content into a single PDF. The e-paper is consistently around 19 pages in length and uses about 2.7 MB of data.

The administrator of the 263Chat WhatsApp group is Nigel Mugamu who created and launched 263Chat media on 29 September 2012 and created the WhatsApp group in 2014. The number 263 is a strong identifier for Zimbabweans – especially for those in the diaspora – because it is the international dialling code for the country. 263Chat (2019) says that 263 creates a sense of nostalgia and community for Zimbabwe's expatriates. An invite was sought from the 263Chat group administrator who was advised of the researchers' intentions. Mugamu agreed to the request since Bursztyn and Birnbaum (2019) state that WhatsApp's privacy policy says that all users must be aware that their data will be shared with other members once they participate in a group, public or not. Mugamu was also assured that the cell phone numbers of the groups' participants would be anonymised to protect them from harm and to also protect their privacy. The researcher was added to the WhatsApp group on 22 July 2018 and left the group on 16 August 2018.

During this period, the researcher assumed an ethnographical position where they overtly observed the interactions that occurred in the group. The presence of the researcher was concealed to avoid influencing the conversations. The researcher listened in and recorded what was being said. This was a controversial methodological approach, but to understand the efficacy of WhatsApp use in democratization processes this was required. Besides, as

Chadwick and Vaccari argue “exploring why, and with what effects, people share news about politics on social media is therefore an essential part of the broader debate about the relationship between the internet and democracy” (2019: 4). I protected the participants in the 263Chat WhatsApp group by anonymising the gathered data and avoiding using direct quotes. The participants’ mobile phone numbers are also anonymised and not used in this study.

All the conversations were around the upcoming harmonised elections on 30 July 2018. The participants in the group conversations were principally based in Zimbabwe as most numbers used +263. The other participants in political dialogues in the 263Chat group were from South Africa +27, Botswana +267, the United Kingdom (UK) +44 and the United States of America (USA) +1. Outside of the political discourse, group participants shared pictures, memes, gifs, jokes, rumours, videos, and URL links to various news stories. The medium of communication used in the group was predominantly English.

The detailed analysis of this ethnographical approach is presented on the WhatsApp findings Chapter (8). In the next section, I chart the limitations and weaknesses of social media research with emphasis on the challenges encountered in conducting the present research.

The limitations and weaknesses of social media research:

The use of the Internet and social media in research impacts the integrity of any study if the ethical practices are not considered. Researchers have a duty to uphold ethical standards and principles when conducting such research. However, there is still no clear ethical framework for researchers entering the field of increasing social media research (Townsend and Wallace, 2016).

When initiating the present research some researchers (Rheingold, 2002; Kahn and Kellner, 2003; Chadwick and Howard, 2008; Varnelis, 2008) had already pontificated that networked publics, smart mobs, and other online groups may function as actual political forces. The present research draws from these arguments. But it is also informed by the contention that political mobilization, participation, and activism through social media may be obstructed by the fact that big media companies and governments can dominate the public discourse (Lindgren, 2013). The present research also acknowledges those arguments that contend that activism through social media promotes a watered down and non-engaged mode of slacktivism (Christensen, 2011; Morozov, 2009) or clicktivism (White, 2010). Here, we might mistake low-threshold user behaviours like that of marketing campaigns for actual commitment and sacrifice.

Like all research that uses Big Data, the present study has its limitations and weaknesses which were recorded during the investigation. Boyd and Crawford (2012) define Big Data as a cultural, technological, and scholarly phenomenon that rests on the interplay of technology, analysis, and mythology. Big Data in technology maximizes computation power and algorithmic accuracy to gather, analyse, link, and compare large data sets. In analysis, it draws on large data sets to identify patterns to make economic, social, technical, and legal claims. And in mythology it extends the widespread belief that large data sets offer a higher form of intelligence and knowledge that can generate insights that were previously impossible, with the aura of truth, objectivity, and accuracy (Boyd and Crawford, 2012). Furthermore, Big Data, like other socio-technical phenomena, "triggers both utopian and dystopian rhetoric" (Boyd and Crawford, 2012: 663). Big Data is seen as a powerful tool to address various societal ills, offering the potential of new insights into areas as diverse as cancer research, terrorism, and climate change. On the other hand, it is seen as a troubling manifestation of Big Brother, enabling invasions of privacy, decreased civil freedoms, and increased state and corporate control (Boyd and Crawford, 2012).

Webb et al (2017) posit that empirical research involving the analysis of Internet-based data raises several ethical challenges. In the context of the present research, one such challenge is the analysis of Twitter data from the specific tweets that have been reproduced using Twitonomy for the purposes of dissemination. Many forms of Internet-based research are considered ethically challenging because of the blurred public and private boundaries of online spaces. The dynamic and interactive nature of the media and the ease with which sensitive data can be accessed, shared, hacked, and/or replicated is a cause for concern (Bender et al, 2017).

In using Twitonomy, the major limitation identified was the weakness of the application. Twitonomy analyses a Twitter account or hashtag and provides descriptive statistics for only a 'given period' on the tweets, users, and hashtags for that Twitter account (Lutu, 2016). For the present research Twitonomy was used on 29 August 2018, and the descriptive statistics recovered during the given period are those from between 18 August 2018 and 29 August 2018. There is no available data available for the period before the 18th of August 2018 when using Twitonomy. This limits the scope of the research as the unrecovered data could provide us with new perspectives and potentially alter the present obtained findings on Zimbabwean netizens' use of Twitter during an election period. Other Twitter and elections in Zimbabwe researchers (Ncube and Yemurai, 2020; Mateveke and Chikafa-Chipiro, 2020) found widespread

misogyny against female politicians. The comments on Twitter about the female politicians were about family or marital status. Physical appearance was also a crucial site for political contestation as it was equated to political competency. Generally, Zimbabwean men expect women to be socially invisible and for their status and voice in the public sphere mediated. On Twitter these types of men continue to impose these socially constructed expectations of the public versus private space upon the women politicians.

Researchers (Golder and Macy, 2011; Shamma et al, 2010; Lotan et al, 2011; Wu et al, 2011) have used Twitter data to examine mood rhythms, media event management, political uprisings, and conversational interactions because it is easy to obtain Twitter data (Boyd and Crawford, 2012). However, "Twitter does not represent 'all people' and it is an error to assume 'people' and 'Twitter users' are synonymous: they are a very particular sub-set" (Boyd and Crawford, 2012: 669). The population using Twitter is not representative of the global population and in the context of the present research those Zimbabweans that have twitter accounts do not represent the ideology of the whole country. Boyd and Crawford (2012) also argue that we must not assume that these accounts and users are equivalent as some users have multiple accounts. Furthermore, some accounts are used by multiple people, and some are 'bots' that produce automated content without directly involving a person.

Bots, short for software robots, have been around since the early days of computers according to Ferrara et al (2016). Bots are created for harm and to spread misinformation by tampering with, manipulating, and deceiving social media users especially when there is a desire to infiltrate political discourse (Ferrara et al, 2016). Bot networks amplify the dissemination of fake news to influence public opinion and election campaigns. "The prevalence of the deployment of social bots in African elections is much more than previously envisaged" (Ndlela, 2020: 22). Portland Communications (2018) found that in ten African elections contested between June 2017 and May 2018 as much as 53% of the leading voices on Twitter came from outside those countries contesting the elections. The bots were active across all elections and were potentially more influential than news media, bloggers, government, campaigners, politicians and think tanks. African countries experience a surge in 'bot' activities during election periods and these bots are the most highly ranked potential influencers ahead of other influencers. In countries like Kenya (27.6%), Senegal (18.6%) and Equatorial Guinea (19.3%) bots drove the Twitter conversations during elections (Ndlela, 2020). Consequentially, these bots ultimately endanger political interaction and participation on social media and therefore undermines the very

core of democratic processes. In the context of the present research, some identified bots in the Zimbabwean Twitter sphere have been outed as either the varakashi or the Nerrorists – the two groups that defend their political principals with relentless fervour to sway public opinion by sometimes disseminating fake news.

Using Big Data for this kind of research also raises the question of ethics as very little is understood about the ethical implications of such actions. It is entirely possible that some social media users would not give permission for their data to be used elsewhere because researchers are rarely in a user's imagined audience (Zwitter, 2014). Just because it is accessible does not make it ethical but, it is also unreasonable to ask researchers to obtain consent from every person who posts a tweet (Boyd and Crawford, 2012). The present research targeted those accounts that mostly belonged to politicians and civic society groups who are already in the public sphere and as such their tweets are construed to be in the interests of the public. When the present study uses Twitter data from accounts that belong to ordinary citizens, the participants' identities are anonymized in line with the standard practice in research to anonymise data for publication. This ensures that participants cannot be identified by dissemination audiences and are therefore protected from harm (Webb et al, 2017).

Conclusion:

This chapter has presented a detailed account of the choice and justification of the research methodology, methods, and procedures used in the present research. A detailed account of limitations and weaknesses of conducting social media research is given. This account places emphasis on the challenges of faced in this study. In trying to understand how social media influences democracy in Zimbabwe and by extension Africa, a qualitive research approach was used. "Qualitative research is about immersing oneself in a scene and trying to make sense of it…" (Tracy, 2020: 3) and this research approach permitted the undertaking of a systematic analysis of the political use of social media in Africa. Qualitative research has several advantages as a research method, first, Tracy (2020) argues that many researchers are all too happy to escape their residences or offices to venture into the field. Second, qualitative research is excellent for studying contexts we are curious about, but do not have a 'valid' reason for entering. Third, qualitative research provides insight into cultural activities that might otherwise be missed in structured surveys or experiments. Fourth, qualitative research can uncover salient issues that can later be studied using more structured methods. Fifth, qualitative research is especially well suited for

accessing tacit, taken-for granted, intuitive understandings of a culture. Sixth, good qualitative research helps people to understand the world, their culture, and its institutions.

The next chapters (6, 7, and 8) present the research findings of the present research with chapter 6 detailing the results from Twitter research.

CHAPTER 6.

Twitter and Democracy in Zimbabwe – Findings and Discussion.

Introduction:

In this chapter, the research findings from Twitter are presented. Previous research by the Internet Society (2019) demonstrates that from the underlying infrastructure to the way users engage, the Internet has evolved in many ways. There is a hyper-connected Internet economy were society and every sector of the economy have been affected by technology. The internet can build communities (Fuchs et al, 2011) which enable online platforms to become global nodes for collective action (Lievrouw 2011; Segerberg and Lance Bennett 2011). Two days before Egypt's long-time dictator Hosni Mubarak was forced to step down under pressure from a popular, youthful, and peaceful revolution an activist, Ghonim, declared that "if you want to free a society, just give them Internet access" (TV Interview, 2011).

Khamis and Vaughn (2011) state that cyber-activists in Egypt effectively deployed new media before, during, and after their revolt as tools for protesters to enhance their agency and capabilities. They efficiently expressed themselves politically, informed others of abuses by the state, organized protests, and acts of resistance against the authoritarian regime and ensured that their voices were heard. Naughton (2011) says three advantages for activists in Egypt stood out from social media's increasingly enabling role – activists were empowered to easily connect; sympathizers could simply join in; and other citizens could watch and participate in real-life online.

Since then, most of the research (Gonzalez-Bailon et al, 2011; Gerbaudo, 2012; Lim, 2014; Svelch and Stetka, 2016) conducted during and after the Arab Spring, the Occupy Wall Street movement in America, Occupy Nigeria, and the Spanish indignados, suggests that activists are increasingly making use of Twitter (hashtags), Facebook (pages) and WhatsApp (groups) to mobilize support, coordinate demonstrations and circulate what Mare (2016) calls protest action frames. Shirky (2011) suggests that to understand the power of social media we should look to the uprisings influenced by digital communication technologies such as the 2001 Manila protests in the Philippines, the 2004 demonstrations in Spain, the 2006 uprising in Belarus, and the 2010 Red Shirt uprising in Thailand.

In Zimbabwe, various studies (Mpofu, 2015; Mpofu, 2016; Mare, 2016; Mhiripiri and Moyo, 2016; Gukurume, 2017; Ncube, 2017) have revealed that social media plays a fundamental role in mobilising political action and creating networked

transnational publics. They also act as a channel of citizen journalism that shapes "repertoires of contention, frame the issues, propagate unifying symbols, and transform individualized activism into connective action" (Mare, 2016: 64) as seen in Baba Jukwa's case. The Zimbabwean LGBTIQ community, through GALZ, can now articulate its ideas on social media since they are banned from mainstream media. Women are now empowered to advance feminism in spaces that have historically favoured patriarchy where politics, activism and engagements are continually gendered and imagined as male domains. Most importantly and principal to the present research, social media has enabled social movements to reinvigorate and revolutionise the political consciousness and activism of Zimbabwean citizens by creating a democratic re-awakening. As such, the following section discusses how those Zimbabweans that are online, have active Twitter profiles use the platform socially and politically.

How Zimbabweans use Twitter:

Zimbabwean Twitter users never miss an opportunity to crack jokes and do not discriminate in their subject matter. They, share jokes, memes and engage in high conflict arguments online like any other Twitter users from anywhere in the world. The most enduring use of their Twitter use is the consistent discussion of Zimbabwean politics that pits the Nelson Chamisa and his MDC Alliance against Emmerson Mnangagwa and his ZANU-PF. The Zimbabwean Twitter sphere is fondly known as Zwitter and the Zimbabwean users are referred to as Twimbos and sometimes as Zimbos. Many a times citizens have sought help and received from other Twitter users; others advertise and sell their goods on the platform to great effect. These goods are predominantly agricultural produce as most Twimbos have turned to farming in the absence of employment. In recent years, Zimbabweans have started using social media to great effect in challenging the authoritarianism and propaganda of the ZANU-PF government. Moyo (2021) confirms this by positing that Zimbabweans are using social media platforms to express outrage at the lawfare waged by their government against dissenting voices. Zimbabweans are particularly using Twitter and other social media platforms to express outrage and displeasure at the actions of the government.

Zimbabwean Twitter users have also launched novel Twitter campaigns against the country's president, Mnangagwa. The prominent campaign being a concerted campaign by government critics to persuade people to unfollow the president's Twitter account. Zimbabwean journalist Hopewell Chin'ono who was arrested after reporting Covid-19 procurement fraud within the health ministry, which led to the arrest and sacking of Health Minister Obadiah Moyo led the onslaught against Mnangagwa's Twitter account (Mashininga, 2020). Chin'ono tweeted that,

dictatorships thrive on public validation therefore unfollowing Mnangagwa was a great form of resistance against his corrupt rule. Chin'ono postulated that unfollowing Mnangagwa was a public rejection which he could not rig, a sly dig about the rigging of the 2018 harmonised elections. Recently, Chin'ono has also inspired the #DemLoot challenge where he released a short free-styled reggae dance-hall track, titled Dem Loot (They Loot) in which he chastises rampant state corruption in the country.

The response by the Zimbabwean government to the digital activism of its citizens has been to deploy anonymous pro-government Twitter accounts that deny allegations of a crisis in Zimbabwe. The Digital Forensic Research Lab (2020) say ZANU-PF and Mnangagwa repeatedly fault the country's crumbling economy, government corruption and food shortages on the economic sanctions imposed by the USA. This claim regularly plays out on social media which are a political battleground since the days of Mugabe when it was (and still is) dangerous to protest in public because of the government crackdown and police brutality. In Zimbabwe, these pro-government accounts are known and referred to as varakashi and the sole purpose is to actively dispute any claims of human rights abuses in the country. The varakashi grouping also includes some high-ranking government officials, that work to prove that the USA is orchestrating a smear campaign against Zimbabwe. However, despite the continued attempts by these varakashi to deny allegations of a crisis in the country, Zimbabwean Twitter users continue to engage in political activism and to dispute government propaganda.

Accordingly, the objective of the present research is to build on these observations in examining how social media influences democratic processes in Zimbabwe. As such, this investigation uses Zimbabwe's harmonised elections in 2018 as a case study.

Twitter has been lauded for its potential political value by academics, journalists, and politicians (Bekafigo and McBride, 2013), and has been prominently covered for its perceived role in activism, disaster recovery, and elections where it is used actively by candidates and voters (Murthy, 2015). Thus, the present research focuses on the general outcomes, results, conclusions and implications of the chosen Twitter accounts and hashtags used before, during and after the 2018 Zimbabwe elections. The identified limitations and weaknesses of the research are also discussed. The chapter then concludes with a summary of the main conclusions of the research conducted using the analytics tool, Twitonomy.

The Hashtags:

These hashtags – #ElectionsZW, #Chamisa, #Zimbabwe, #EDinauguration, #GodIsInIt, #ZimbabweDecides2018, and #ZimElectionResults – trended just before, during and after the 31 July 2018 elections. This was the period between 18 August 2018 and 29 August 2018 when textual mining was conducted using the information retrieval system Twitonomy.

The hashtag is a largely user-generated mechanism for tagging and collating those tweets which are related to a specific topic. Supporters of certain election candidates create a specific hashtag to push forward a cause (Bruns and Burgess, 2015). There has been a substantial increase in research on hashtags on elections and politics across the world (Broersma and Graham, 2012; Larsson and Moe, 2014). Twitter has largely played a critical role of coordinating political conversations and debates as well as spreading information about an election (Rogers, 2013) and Twitter hashtags allow users to design politically themed practices on social media (Munoriyarwa and Chambwera, 2020). In political activism, Berenger (2013) says that Twitter hashtags are central in mobilising like-minded individuals and setting the agenda for established international mass media that spread images, messages, and insights about political events.

In digital activism, there has been an increase of hashtag activism – where discursive protest on social media is united through a hashtagged word, phrase, or sentence. A unique feature of hashtag activism on Twitter is that it starts with a hashtag. Adding the hashtag sign # to a word "makes it easier for other users on Twitter to search, link, and interact with one another via the hashtagged word and to share stories related to it" (Yang, 2016: 14). Hashtag activism can typically span days, weeks, and even months during which they encourage audience participation where people read, retweet, comment on others' tweets or post their own with the same hashtag. However, while such data is easy to collect for research it can miss conversations on topics that do not include the key hashtag.

The Twitter Accounts:

The Twitter accounts used in the present study are those that belong to the politicians who were contesting the elections; some prominent politically aligned commentators on the events surrounding the elections, and finally a civil society group who had a vested interest in the outcome of the elections. The 2018 Zimbabwean election was one of the most anticipated polls since the 1980 independence as it generated both anxiety and hope. Munoriyarwa and Chambwera (2020) say the anxiety emanated from the unusual fact that these elections would become the first, in a very long time, to not feature both Robert

Mugabe and Morgan Tsvangirai – the usual protagonists. Quest and McKenzie (2018) say the hope originated from Mnangagwa's exaggerated declarations of a new Zimbabwe that would leave Mugabe's mismanagement behind and be open for business.

In the ensuing sections, the findings will first be presented accompanied by visual aids of tweets. Secondly, there will be a section which centres on the discussion of these findings and an explanation of what they mean in relation to the research questions of this study.

The Findings from the selected Twitter accounts:

The first Twitter account analysed belongs to the former UK envoy to Zimbabwe, Ambassador Catriona Laing @CatrionaLaing1. The account will also be used to display the descriptive statistics of Twitonomy by attaching screenshot images.

Ambassador Catriona Laing (former UK envoy to Zimbabwe):

Ambassador Catriona Laing stirred controversy when she was pictured wearing Mnangagwa's trademark scarf while on official business at 10 Downing Street[16]. Opposition supporters quickly accused the Ambassador of endorsing Mnangagwa. Laing dismissed the criticism as absurd conspiracy theories and maintained that she did not support anyone or anything other than a better future for Zimbabwe. She also denied backing police violence against Zimbabwean citizens (News24, 2018). Figure 1.3 shows her Twitter exchange with self-exiled former ZANU-PF information czar, Professor Jonathan Moyo. In Figure 1.4 Laing is accused of ridiculing the opposition grouping MDC Alliance and again she denies this by saying she recognises Nelson Chamisa as a major political figure in Zimbabwe.

In another shocking incident, the Ambassador liked a tweet posted by Ali Naka (a well-known ZANU-PF varakashi[17]) that suggested that too many freedoms had been extended for Zimbabweans and these needed to be trimmed. Her excuse was that she liked the tweet by mistake because of clumsy finger scrolling (Nehanda Radio, 2018). Interestingly, Ali Naka's Twitter account @ali_naka is one of the users most replied to by the Ambassador. This put the credibility and

[16] Also, simple known as Number 10 is the headquarters and official residence of the Prime Minister and Government of the United Kingdom.

[17] "Their mandate is clearly laid out. They have no doubt about their mission and execute it with relentless fervour: Commonly known as Varakashi, Zimbabwe's online army defends President Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa on any issue. Varakashi is the Shona word for "destroyers." They troll social media platforms — especially Twitter — and criticize anyone who dares to challenge Mnangagwa's policies or leadership" (GV Sub-Saharan Africa, 2019: 1).

sincerity of Laing's claims that she wants a better future for Zimbabwe into question. Moreover, the Ambassador is also alleged to have paid a substantial amount of money to a jailed Zimbabwe Minister, Prisca Mupfumira. Laing is accused of paying Mupfumira a large sum of money so she could contravene the country's adoption procedures and rules. Laing adopted a daughter from a children's home in 2017 when she was ambassador to Zimbabwe (Tarumbwa, 2019).

Fig.1.3.

Fig.1.4.

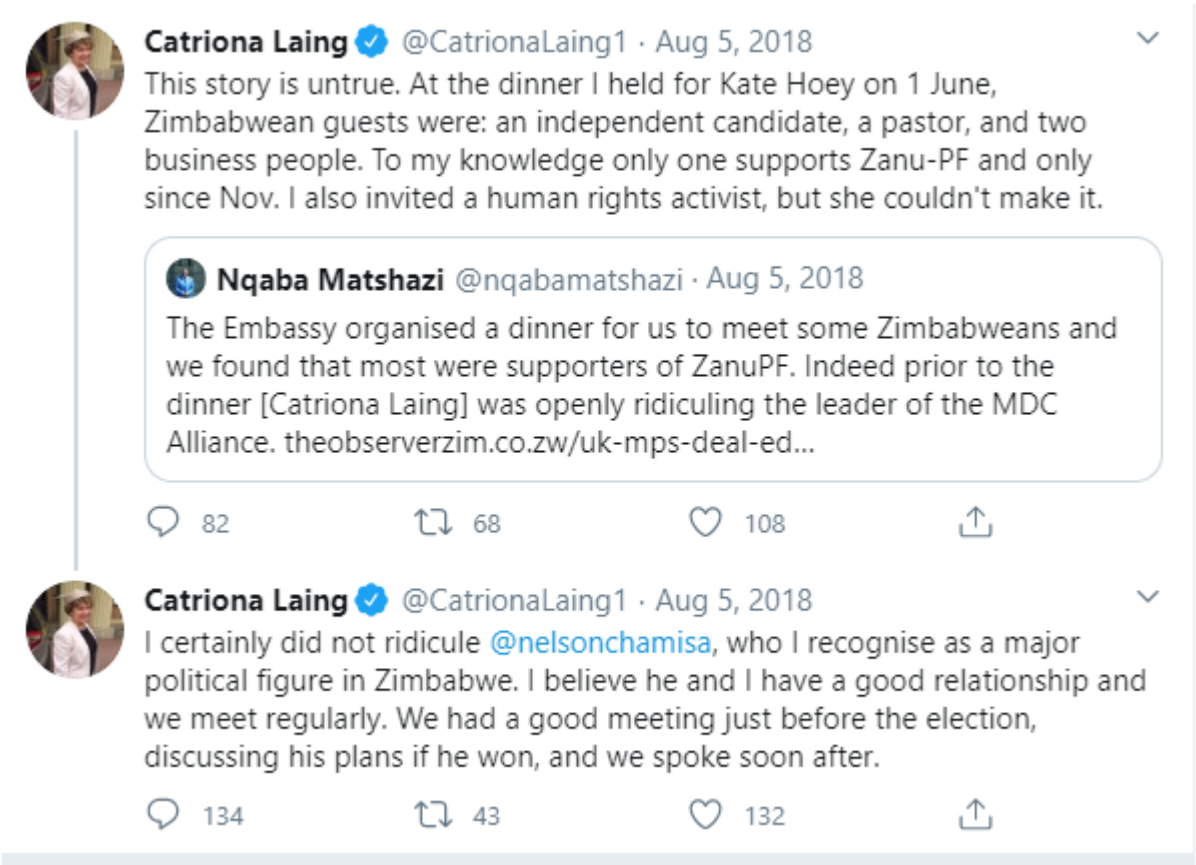


Figure 1.5 exhibits how Twitonomy analytics (@CatrionaLaing1) are displayed in a porta4le document format (pdf) file. Full copies of the analytics are provided in the appendix of this research.

Fig.1.5.

From @CatrionaLaing1's 'bio'[18] the Twitonomy analytics reveal that she is the British Ambassador to Zimbabwe. She has 6,102 tweets, follows 1,639 Twitter accounts and the account is followed by 29,832 followers. The Ambassador joined

[18] A 'bio' short for biography on social media is a condensed description of a person's life. It usually involves just the basic facts like education, work, relationships, and interests.

Twitter on 24 March 2012. The British Embassy's Twitter account @UKinZimbabwe is included in her bio as is her geographical location – Harare, Zimbabwe. @CatrionaLaing1 has 3,195 tweets from 3 November 2015 to 29 August 2018 the day Twitonomy was used to mine data from her account where she tweets on average 3.10 times a day.

Figure 1.6 displays whom @CatrionaLaing1 retweeted the most (477 times) and its @UKinZimbabwe, the British Embassy's Twitter account. @UKinZimbabwe is also the user @CatrionaLaing1 most replied to (7 times) and most mentioned (93 times).

Fig.1.6.

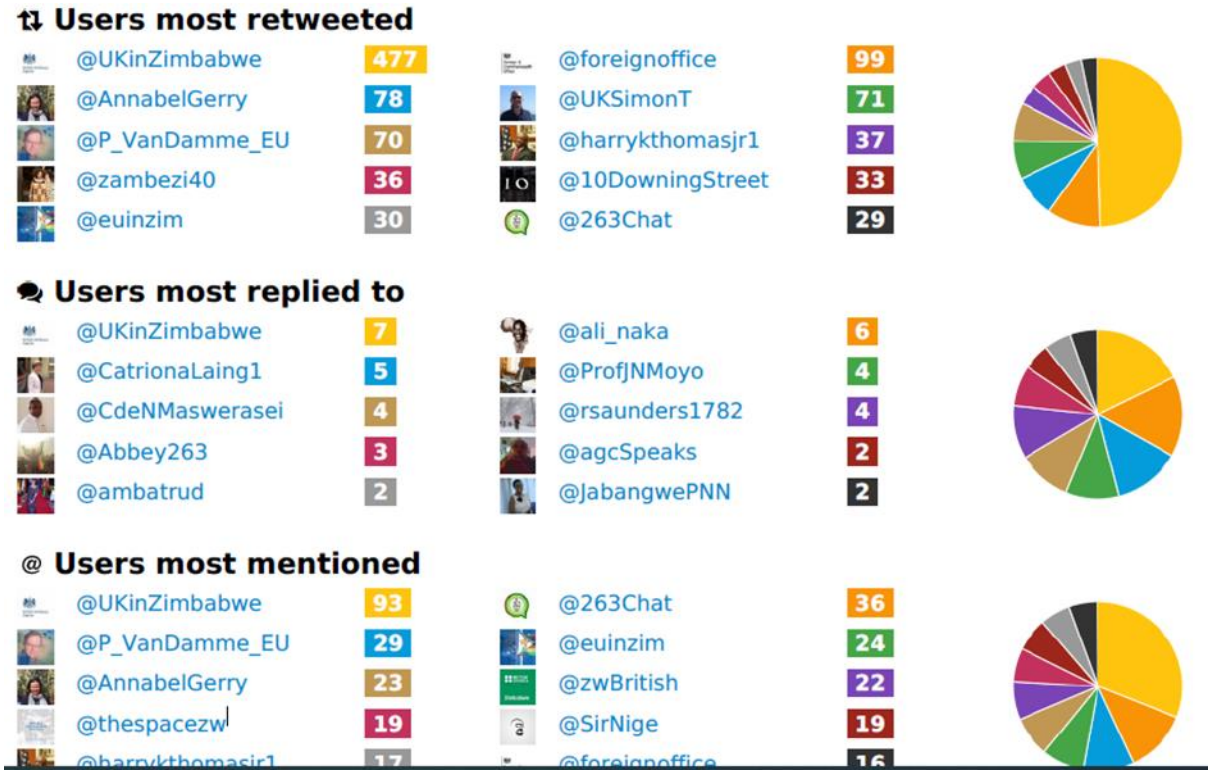
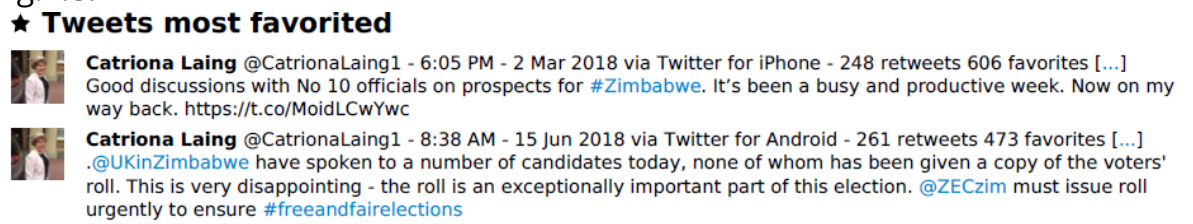


Figure 1.7 displays the hashtags @CatrionaLaing1 used the most (#zim91 times and #zimbabwe 66 times), and the most retweeted tweet by the account (261 times). It is also noteworthy that the Ambassadors' third most used hashtag #twimbos (46 times) is the online nickname for Zimbabweans which has been popularised by its netizens since 2014 (Ncube, 2017).

Fig.1.7.

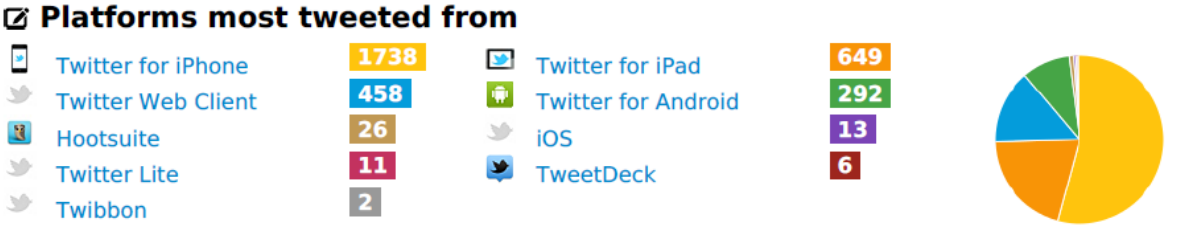
Figure 1.8 displays the most favourited tweet (606 times)

Fig.1.8.



Other descriptive analytics revealed on Twitonomy display the days of the week and hours of the day @CatrionaLaing1 uses Twitter. They also reveal the platforms most tweeted from as figure 1.9 displays.

Fig.1.9.



In @CatrionaLaing1's most retweeted tweet she tagged @UKinZimbabwe and @ZECzim the official Twitter account for Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC). In the tweet she states that she is disappointed by the ZEC's failure to issue contesting candidates with copies of the voters roll to enable free and fair elections. This is an unusually different take from the Ambassador who is frequently accused of bias in Zimbabwe's political circles. The subject of her tweet, the voter's roll has always been a subject of contestation in Zimbabwe's elections. ZEC, for first time since independence, produced a checkable voters' roll of about 5.8 million voters on a disc and in a format, which could be checked electronically. Since the 2000 parliamentary elections there has been considerable information from election analysts that the voter's roll has included fabricated and duplicated

voters. When the MDC challenged this in court after the 2002 presidential poll, narrowly won by President Mugabe, the case was never concluded. In the 2013 elections, it was found that hundreds of policemen were put on the voters roll in an urban constituency where they did not reside in. The MDC subsequently lost that seat. There have been many other examples which emerge on election days and afterwards that show that Zimbabwe's voters' roll is inaccurate. In each instance, ZANU-PF has won the elections with a landslide majority (Thornycroft, 2018).

Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa (President of the Republic of Zimbabwe):

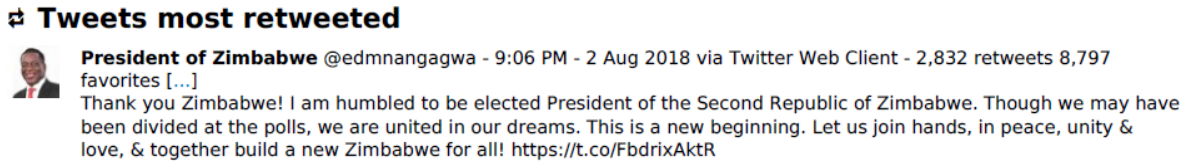
Emmerson Mnangagwa was the biggest beneficiary of Mugabe's ouster as he became the president of Zimbabwe. When Twitonomy was used to extract data from his Twitter account on 29 August 2018 he had 246 tweets and 220,334 followers. The account followed only 67 other accounts. @edmnangagwa joined Twitter on 27 December 2011 and only had 245 tweets from 10 December 2014 to the day the data was extracted for analysis. Figure 1.10 displays @edmnangagwa's Twitonomy metrics.

Fig.1.10

Perhaps, @edmnangagwa's low activity on Twitter can be attributed to his reasoning that he is old and does not know how to use social media. During a presidential campaign rally in May 2018, Mnangagwa spoke to the younger members of his ZANU-PF party saying "some of us are old, you are still youthful and masters of technology. The new digital chatrooms are war rooms. Jump in and hammer party enemies online. Don't play second fiddle" (Mnangagwa, 2018: 1). It was at this moment that he gave his faceless online army the name varakashi. The varakashi are on call 24 hours a day and they disrupt online debates and frustrate criticism of President Emerson Mnangagwa and his government. Deliberations on social media are spammed, slowed, or driven off-topic by torrents of disingenuous interruptions by these varakashi (Mwareya, 2019).

In @edmnangagwa's most retweeted tweet (Figure 1.11) on 2 August 2018, he reiterated that this was a new beginning for Zimbabwe following his promise to take the country – mired in political and economic crisis for nearly two decades – in a new direction and a break from Mugabe's authoritarian rule and economic mismanagement (Noyes, 2020).

Fig.1.11.



Nelson Chamisa (MDC-Alliance President):

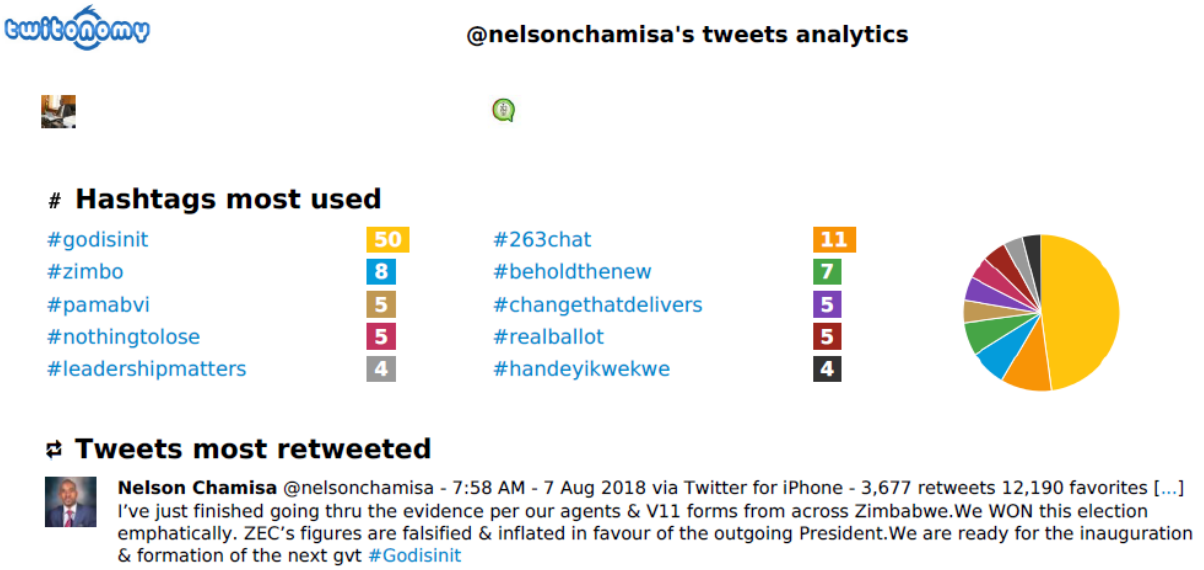
Nelson Chamisa is the MDC-A leader who stood as its presidential candidate in the 2018 elections. Figure 1.12 displays @nelsonchamisa's Twitonomy metrics of 2,680 tweets from 18 September 2010 to 29 August 2018. @nelsonchamisa joined Twitter on 18 September 2010, and he is followed by 355,105 followers and in turn follows back 866 accounts.

Fig.1.12.

In @nelsonchamisa's most retweeted tweet (3,677 times) were he claims electoral victory he uses his most used hashtag #godisinit (50 times) see Figure 2.0. The #godisinit hashtag exhibits @nelsonchamisa's implied Christianity and reveals how "religious modes of thinking about the world are widespread in Africa and have a pervasive influence on politics in the broadest sense" (Ellis and Ter Haar, 2007: 385). In Zimbabwe, churches have benefitted from the freedom of worship, protection and independence guaranteed by the Constitution. But politicians take advantage of their natural docility to prey on the church's large majority for votes (Mujinga, 2018). "Few people would contest the continued importance that religion holds in African life, in terms of not only numbers of adherents, but also the vast scope of religious experiences and the links between religion and politics and public life" (Abbink, 2014: 84). ZANU-PFs' politics of manipulation has since enabled politicians to harness religious ideologies and concepts for their own gain

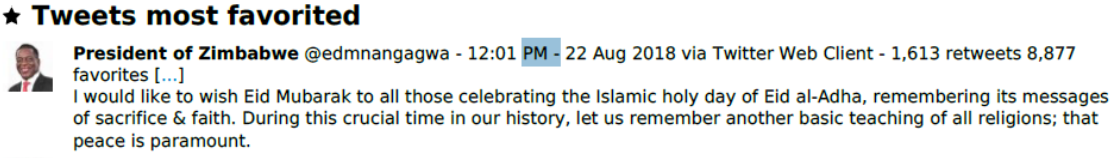
as they go on to manipulate religious symbols, concepts, and persons to consolidate their grip on power (Mujinga, 2018). See Figure 1.14, @edmnangagwa's most favourited tweet (8,877 times) on the 22nd of August 2018 the day Zimbabwe's Constitutional Court began to hear the oppositions' petition seeking to overturn the presidential election result. However, despite allegations of electoral fraud the success of the legal challenge was unlikely. @edmnangagwa wishes the Muslim community Eid Mubarak and adds that the basic teaching of all religions is the observance of peace. Mnangagwa talks about peace as he anticipates the rejection of the court's ruling by Zimbabwean opposition members which could potentially drive the country into anarchy.

Fig.1.13.



The hashtag #godisinit is mostly used by 'Nerrorists' to defend @nelsonchamisa just as @edmnangagwa and ZANU-PF have varakashi who fight their online battles. The 'Nerrorists' serve the same purpose for @nelsonchamisa and the MDC-A. The name is adopted from Chamisa's nickname 'Nero' and combined with the term terrorists. Nerrorists, like varakashi, are borne out of the context of Zimbabwe's toxic and polarised politics. The Nerrorists are notorious for throwing verbal expletives on Chamisa's critics and opponents (Munoriyarwa and Chambwera, 2020).

Fig.1.14.



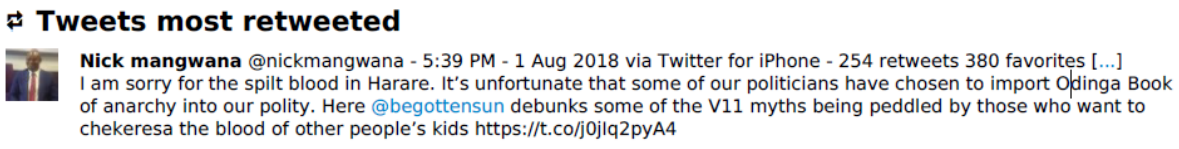
Nick Mangwana (Commander of the varakashi?):

Nick Mangwana can perhaps be described as the commander of ZANU-PF's varakashi as he is ever so vocal in defending Mnangagwa and the party. @nickmangwana joined Twitter on 17 July 2009 and tweets on average 67.98 times a day in defence of all things ZANU-PF (See Figure 1.15). According to his Twitter bio he is the chairman of ZANU-PF UK and its representative in the UK and Mainland Europe. @nickmangwana commands a following of 34,965 followers and follows back a paltry 979 Twitter accounts.

Fig.1.15.

In @nickmangwana's most retweeted tweet (254 times, see Figure 1.16) he accuses the opposition of importing Odinga's book of anarchy into Zimbabwe's society. Raila Amolo Odinga is a Kenyan politician who served as the Leader of the Opposition from 2013 to 2018. Odinga, in his capacity as the leader of Kenya's main opposition party, called for a campaign of civil disobedience and resistance on the eve of a controversial rerun presidential poll. However, there was relief when he did not call for protests, which could have led to widespread violence. Instead, Odinga told supporters to just stay at home or hold vigils and prayers away from polling stations (Burke, 2017). @nickmangwana exemplified that participation on the interactive social media platforms diminishes physical and geographical constraints. This leads to individuals partaking in transnational democracies which broadens their democratic capacity (Bohman, 2008; Sunstein, 2008) as Mangwana is very much aware of Kenya's political milieu.

Fig.1.16.



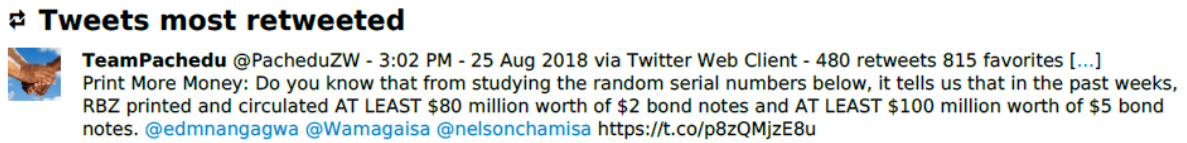
Team Pachedu (civil society group):

The question of what effect, if any, social media has on civic engagement and political participation is perhaps exemplified by Team Pachedu. Clarke (2010) argues that in civic engagement social media promotes accountability, transparency and public engagement with political institutions and figures. @PacheduZW appears to attempt to achieve this as they are a "network of Zimbabwean citizens that strive to inculcate the spirit of transparency, responsibility and accountability by all public officials without fear or favour" (Pachedu website, 2018: 1). Pachedu is a Shona term that means on our own. @PacheduZW joined Twitter on 08 July 2018 and have 1,656 tweets on the day of data extraction, 29 August 2018, using Twitonomy. @PacheduZW tweets on average 31.85 tweets per day (see Figure 1.17).

@PacheduZW offers a glimpse into the role of citizen journalism in the context of social media in the democratic empowerment of ordinary citizens within the framework of participatory politics. For the previously excluded communities' social media is empowering (Poster, 2001) and this guides a renaissance of democracy (Agre, 1994). Bottom-up coverage is ensured as citizen journalists offer their first-hand reports about what is going on around them (see Figure 1.18) and the role of audiences is changed from passive consumers of news to active producers and consumers (Allan, 2006).

Fig.1.17.

Fig.1.18.



Professor Jonathan Moyo (self-exiled former Zimbabwe Minister of Information):

Most, if not all, of Zimbabwe's problems around freedoms of speech and media can be directly linked to @ProfJNMoyo. Jonathan Moyo, former university professor, astute political observer, and Mugabe's most celebrated critic at one time, innovatively led the publicizing of ZANU-PF's and by extension government's rejected constitutional referendum in 2000. He was rewarded with an appointment as Minister heading the Department of Information and Publicity in the President's office (Mazango, 2005).

His tenure saw new restrictive laws being used to reorganise the various press and broadcasting media in the country. Independent minded editors were fired, and business caution dropped. State media became excessively used as government attack dogs on enemies of the state. Moyo was the author of AIPPA (2002) a law under which saw the closure of newspapers and the arrest of many journalists. In parliament, Moyo elaborately explained that the law was meant to deal with the media-led threats to freedom of expression since the private media represented a whole white global network and front that was formed against landless blacks and their struggle. He also masterminded the Broadcasting Services Act and the ZBC Commercialization Act which to this day have delayed the opening of the sector to independent players (Mazango, 2005).

The Twitter thread by Zim Media Review (@ZimMediaReview) best captures the damage @ProfJNMoyo did to Zimbabwe's media sector (see Figures 1.19 and link https://twitter.com/ZimMediaReview/status/993029305134469120).
@ZimMediaReview tweeted the thread after @ProfJNMoyo bemoaned the undemocratic nature of Zimbabwe's media environment. The irony was clearly lost on him. @ZimMediaReview, which is not under analysis in the present research, provide "Reviews of Zimbabwe media content. News Updates. Political Commentary. Supporters of Freedom of Expression spaces. RTs are not endorsements" (@ZimMediaReview bio, 2020). They joined Twitter in January 2015 and have over 148,000 followers.

Nevertheless, it would be disingenuous to blame all of Zimbabwe's restricted media and speech problems on @ProfJNMoyo alone. "Until independence in 1980, the minority government of Ian Smith passed several pieces of legislation aimed at stifling newspaper and television coverage and restricting the flow of information, especially information pertaining to national security and the war effort" (Chavunduka, 2002: 281). ZANU-PF inherited these pieces of legislation to use to their advantage and monopolize state media. But Chavunduka (2002)

argues that Zimbabwe's media have still managed to contribute to improved governance despite the difficult environment in which they operate in. They have managed to influence certain decisions which the state has adopted. Zimbabwe's media has exposed corruption within the government and in the private sector and championed causes that have led to official changes in state policy (Chavunduka, 2002).

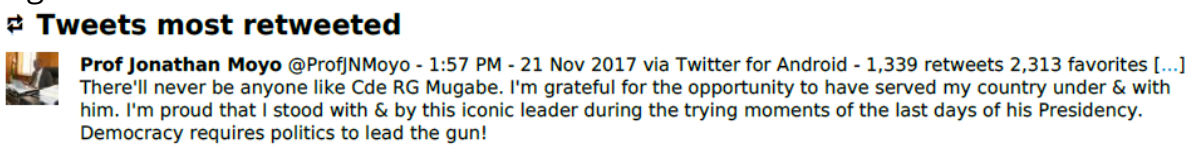
Fig.1.20.

Currently @ProfJNMoyo spends most of time on Twitter ridiculing and criticizing his former ZANU-PF colleagues, most notably @edmnangagwa. @ProfJNMoyo has also suddenly rediscovered the ideals of democracy which he helped decimate for such a long time during his tenure as the Minister of Information for Mugabe. @ProfJNMoyo joined Twitter on 09 February 2015 and commands a following of 370,704 followers with 27,418 tweets from tweeting on average 7.48 tweets per day (see Figure 1.21).

Fig.1.21.

@ProfJNMoyo's most retweeted tweet (see Figure 1.22) feeds into the widely held view that he is still bitter about his and Mugabe's unceremonious ouster from the government. It also refers to the coup carried out against Mugabe by signing off his tweet with 'democracy requires politics to lead the gun'.

Fig.1.22.



Alex T Magaisa @Wamagaisa (a Nerrorist?).

Alex T Magaisa is a lawyer, academic, and former advisor to the late former Prime Minister, Morgan Tsvangirai (see Figure 1.23). @Wamagaisa joined Twitter on 21 April 2011 and has 122,900 tweets. He follows 1,513 Twitter accounts and in turn has 173,751 followers. @Wamagaisa tweets 58.02 times per day.

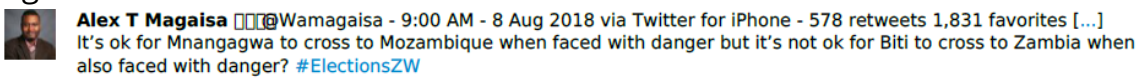
Fig.1.23.

It can be argued that @Wamagaisa is a Nerrorist although the level-headed kind that does not use verbal expletives on Chamisa's critics or opponents

(Munoriyarwa and Chambwera, 2020). Due to his station in life as a lawyer and academic @Wamagaisa appears only interested in using his wit and evidenced-based facts to advance his arguments (see Figure 1.24 and 1.25).

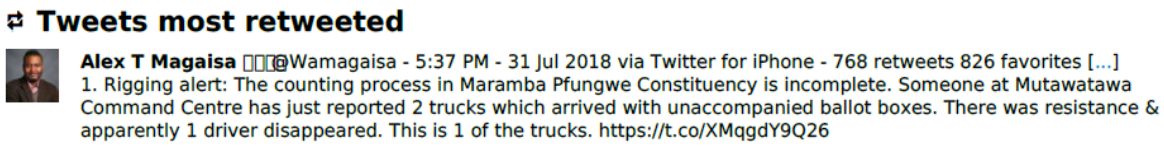
Fig.1.24.

Fig.1.25.



In 2010, Moyo put forward that the advent of new communications technologies, the Internet, and mobile phones, ushered in a new era of political communication where citizens actively participate both in the election campaign and monitoring processes. Moreover, as Zimbabwe's first two post-independence elections in 1980 and 1985 were generally passed as a credible expression of the will of the people. The subsequent elections in the country have been largely contested, with allegations of rigging (see Figure 1.26), gerrymandering, vote-buying, and coercion, among several other irregularities (Moyo, 2010). Today on Twitter, citizens like @Wamagaisa display how they actively participates in election campaigns and monitoring processes (see Figures 3.2).

Fig.1.26.



The findings from the hashtags:

A hashtag is "a short keyword, prefixed with the hash symbol '#' "(Bruns and Burgess, 2011: 1). The hashtag is used as a means of coordinating a distributed discussion between small or large groups of users with no need to be connected through existing follower networks. Hashtags can be used to mark tweets that are relevant to specific known themes and topics for example, #ElectionsZW for the 2018 harmonised elections in Zimbabwe. Hashtag participants that share specific interests for example, #Chamisa used by supporters of Nelson Chamisa who deliberately engage with one another, are categorised as a Twitter community by Bruns and Burgess (2011).

On 29 August 2018, the application Twitonomy was used to mine data from Twitter for the specific hashtags #ElectionsZW, #Chamisa, #Zimbabwe, #EDinauguration, #GodIsInIt, #ZimbabweDecides2018 and #ZimElectionResults.

These hashtags marked tweets that were relevant to the Zimbabwe 2018 harmonised elections. Table 1.1 shows the number of tweets that used each hashtag between 19 August 2018 and 29 August 2018.

Table 1.0

Hashtag	Number of tweets using hashtag
#ElectionsZW	1,823 tweets
#Chamisa	901 tweets
#Zimbabwe	3,038 tweets
#EDinauguration	3,055 tweets
#GodIsInIt	3,063 tweets
#ZimbabweDecides2018	739 tweets
#ZimElectionResults	770 tweets
7 hashtags	**Total 13,389 tweets**

Source: Twitonomy

#ElectionsZW

The search analytics from Twitonomy reveal the hashtags' most influential users (see Figure 1.27), most engaging users (see Figure 1.28), most active users (see Figure 1.29). The analytics of the other 6 hashtags are presented in Table 1.2 below.

Table 1.1.

Hashtag	Most Influential Users	Most Engaging Users	Most Active Users
#Chamisa	@ewnupdates @ewnreporter	@DailyNewsZim @JMoyo4	@KNeshanje @MaNondo1978
#Zimbabwe	@WFP @SABCNewsOnline	@peterndoro @ZimbabwePics	@263Chat @KNeshanje
#EDinauguration	@eNCA @MbalulaFikile	@AldrinSampear @peterndoro	@ramsayshonge @ZimbabweUpdate
#GodIsInIt	@RobertAlai @nelsonchamisa	@nelsonchamisa @BitiTendai	@_diimzz @Save_Our_Zim
#ZimbabweDecides2018	@SABCNewsOnline @ItsMutai	@afr_pol @KumbiraiJF	@nkosana_malinga @MashokoHerbert
#ZimElectionResults	@News24 @SABCNewsOnline	@povozim @News24	@povozim @KNeshanje

Source: Twitonomy.

Fig.1.27.

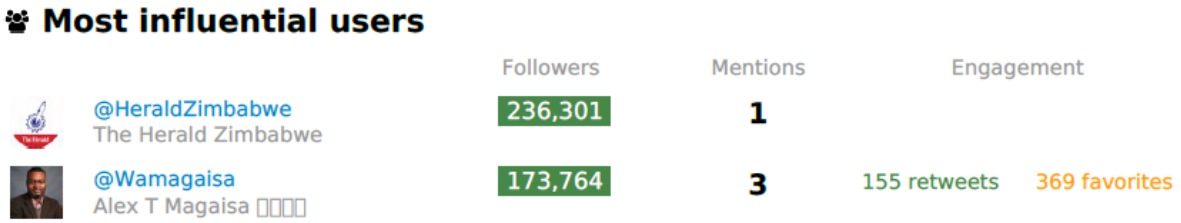


Fig.1.28.

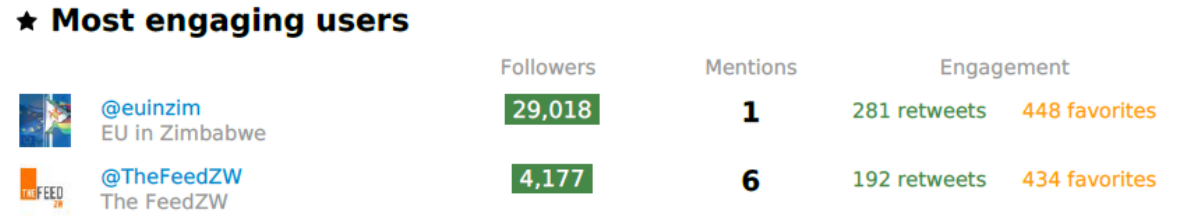
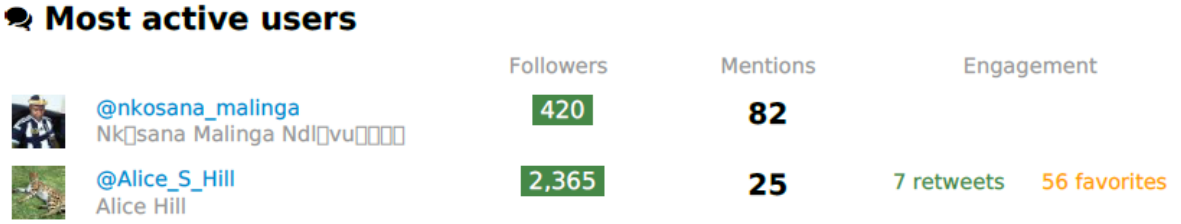


Fig.1.29.



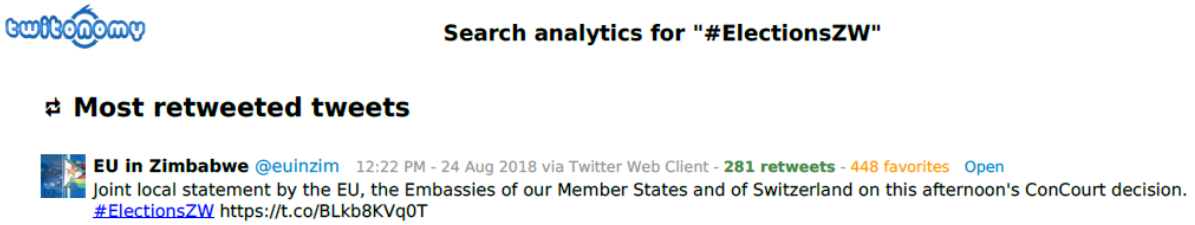
During the search period (29 August 2018) the Twitonomy analytics for #ElectionsZW that came up did not refer to the 30 July 2018 elections instead they referred to the Constitutional Court judgement about Nelson Chamisa's presidential election legal challenge. Chamisa filed a presidential election legal challenge at the Constitutional Court of Zimbabwe against the ZEC and Emmerson Mnangagwa. The Constitutional Court heard the challenge on 22 August 2018. Two days later, on the 24th of August 2018, the Court dismissed the case with costs in a unanimous decision read by Chief Justice Luke Malaba. The Constitutional Court then declared Emmerson Mnangagwa the winner of Zimbabwe's 30 July 2018 Presidential Election. In the judgement, Malaba said the main reason for dismissing the application was a lack of (vote-rigging) evidence to support specific examples of the allegations put before the court (Kubatana.Net, 2018).

The Constitutional Court case clarifies why the two most influential users of #ElectionsZW are @HeraldZimbabwe (The Herald Zimbabwe) and @Wamagaisa (see Figure 3.9). During the 2018 harmonised elections a large majority of the stories in the @HeraldZimbabwe (58.33%) focused on Mnangagwa. The other dominant voices were government officials (8.33%), ZEC officials (8.33%), ZANU-PF officials (6.25%) and foreign missions (6.25%) (Matingwina, 2019).

@Wamagaisa as revealed by his Twitter bio (see Figure 2.9) is a lawyer and writer on Zimbabwean law and politics. Furthermore, he was also an adviser to the constitution writers in Zimbabwe. In one of his tweets, he even reveals intimate details about the hearing of the presidential petition.

One of the most engaging users of #ElectionsZW is the European Union via their Twitter account @euinzim (EU in Zimbabwe). Additionally, @euinzim has one of the most retweeted tweets (see Figure 1.30) which is also in relation to the Constitutional Court judgement. This is not surprising as Zimbabwe and @euinzim have had a strained relationship since 2002. Prior to the 2002 elections, the European Union (EU) expressed conditions of fair election procedures to be met by the ruling government of Mugabe's ZANU-PF to avoid sanctions. However, those elections were held under unstable conditions and the government embarked on a violent repression of the civil society and opposition parties. In response to the continuing human rights violations, the intimidation of political opponents and the independent press and against barring the deployment of EU observers for the presidential elections, the European Union (EU) eventually imposed sanctions on Zimbabwe (Giumelli, and Kruliš, 2012).

Fig.1.30.



#Chamisa

@nelsonchamisa had the dedicated hashtag #Chamisa which was widely used after the Constitutional Court ruling against his presidential election challenge. The most influential users of the hashtag were South Africa's Eyewitness News @ewnupdates and @ewnreporter. The most engaging user was The Daily News (@DailyNewsZim). The nature of #Chamisa's most influential and engaging users is most likely a result of the fact that studies (Moyse 2009; European Union Observer Mission Report 2018; SADC Observers Report 2018) have identified that Zimbabwean public media shows clear bias towards the ruling party, ZANU-PF. Therefore, all opposing elements to ZANU-PF and the government get coverage from private and independent media (@DailyNewsZim) or foreign media (@ewnupdates and @ewnreporter).

The most favourited tweet (see Figure 1.31) which uses #Chamisa is from @DailyNewsZim. It is a news story about how war veterans say there will be no

progress in Zimbabwe without #Chamisa. The war veterans appear to be softening their stance on opposition politicians who do not have liberation war credentials. This is an improvement from the days when Tsvangirai was Prime Minister and the then army generals indicated that they would never salute anyone without liberation war credentials. This led to numerous calls for reforms in the security sector as state organs acted like political entities (The Zimbabwean, 2011).

Fig.1.31.

#Zimbabwe

The most influential users of #Zimbabwe were the World Food Programme (@WFP) and the @SABCNewsOnline. The @WFP have become a constant feature in Zimbabwe as the country navigates its economic crisis which has led to widespread acute food insecurity. Drought, mismanagement, and corruption have pushed the country to "its worst hunger crisis in a decade with half of the population – 7.7 million people – food insecure" (UN News, 2019: 1). The increasingly unreliable rainy season and the fact that many farmers are still recovering from the 2014-16 El Nino-induced drought coupled with corruption has not helped the situation either. To date there are no records to show how the Command Agriculture US$3 billion was disbursed to improve farm yields and alleviate famine (The Independent, 2019). The most engaging user is Peter Ndoro (@peterndoro) and the most active user is @263Chat @263Chat pioneered Twitter political deliberations in Zimbabwe by helping those Zimbabweans who were online to counter the effects of the governments' plethora of laws such as the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) of 2001 and the Miscellaneous Offenses Act of 2001 which severely limited public debate and criticism of government (Ncube, 2017).

The most retweeted tweet is by the news anchor for the South African Broadcasting Cooperation (SABC), @peterndoro. Since Zimbabwean public media shows clear bias towards the ruling party ZANU-PF, opposition politicians find airtime from foreign news outlets. @peterndoro's tweet explains how @SABCNewsOnline are one of the most influential users of #Zimbabwe. The tweet also uses #EDinauguration which is also analysed in this study.

#EDinauguration

Emmerson Mnangagwa's inauguration after the Constitutional Court declared him the winner of Zimbabwe's 30 July 2018 presidential election saw the generation of #EDinauguration. The most influential users of the hashtag were @eNCA, @MbalulaFikile and @SABCNewsOnline who have over 4 million followers combined. The most influential users are all from South Africa. Over the years South Africa has become invested in Zimbabwe due to its political and economic problems which have resulted in a high influx of Zimbabwean migrants to South Africa. South Africa has been the destination of choice for many Zimbabweans due to its proximity to Zimbabwe. Since independence in 1980 there have been marked waves of migration into South Africa. Firstly, white people left for South Africa after ZANU-PF's electoral victory in 1980. Secondly, Ndebele Zimbabweans fled to South Africa after ZANU-PF's Gukurahundi massacres in Matabeleland and Midlands between 1983 and 1987. Thirdly, Zimbabweans have been fleeing the economic hardships and political persecutions which started in early 2000 to the present day (De Jager and Musuva, 2016). The influential users are overly optimistic about #EDinauguration and probably assume that it means a fresh start for Zimbabweans and new beginnings for Zimbabwe.

#GodIsInIt

In Zimbabwean politics, religion has developed in terms of "consecration and repudiation" (Dube and Nkoane, 2018: 225). Consecration refers to religious leaders being sympathetic to political parties or the government. These religious sects are rewarded by the political party or government support in their religious activities. Repudiation refers to the political party or government maltreatment of political figures who dislodge dissenting religious voices that champion social justice, accountability, and proper governance (Dube and Nkoane, 2018). ZANU-PF has been at the forefront of the development of religion in consecration or repudiation terms. Thankfully, opposition politicians are also able to use religion in their political activities. Politicians always attempt to make political capital out of displays of religious allegiance or respect hence #GodIsInIt. However, with ZANU-PF, if the church or its members dissent and call for social justice, accountability and proper governance, the government repudiates them just like Pastor Evan Mawarire and his #ThisFlag movement (Gukurume, 2017).

In the 2018 harmonised elections, @nelsonchamisa, his acolytes and anyone on social media who advocated against ZANU-PF popularised #GodIsInIt. In the country, much like most of Africa, religious narratives and discourses are used to justify both good acts and oppressive structures in politics (Dube and Nkoane,

2018). In the case of the Zimbabwean 2018 harmonised elections #GodIsInIt highlights the faith of @nelsonchamisa and suggests that the MDC-A are good whereas @edmnangagwa and ZANU-PF are oppressive and bad. Naturally, @nelsonchamisa appears in the lists of most influential and engaging users.

#ZimbabweDecides2018

The most influential user of #ZimbabweDecides2018 was @SABCNewsOnline, and the most engaging user was @afr_pol (Dr Sara Rich Dorman). The most active user was @nkosana_malinga (Nkosana Malinga). The tweets using #ZimbabweDecides2018 reveal mixed emotions from the electorate, there is relief that the elections are finally over. Some tweets exhibit frustration and dismay at how they were decided while other tweets display scorn and glee at the outcome.

#ZimElectionResults

The most influential users of #ZimElectionResults were (News 24) @News24 and @SABCNewsOnline and the most engaging users were (Povo Zim) @povozim and @News24 @povozim was also the most active user.

#ZimElectionResults concludes the research findings on hashtags and the following section focuses on the identified limitations and weaknesses of the Twitter research. The last section will then summarise the main conclusions of this research drawn from the findings and considering the encountered limitations and weaknesses.

Discussion of the findings:

1. **@edmnangagwa.**

Mnangagwa spent much of his political life in successive governments led by Mugabe which always restricted the freedoms of speech and media. These governments also wielded unrestricted monopoly over all state media. Moreover, his ZANU-PF party is unsympathetic and intolerant when dealing with dissenting voices (Mpofu, 2015). When Mnangagwa was dismissed from his position as vice-president of Zimbabwe he fled and subsequently released a 5-page statement declaring his intention to return to the country and usurp power from Mugabe (News24, 2017). The statement was widely circulated on social media, Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp, and was also picked up by foreign media.

It can be argued that Mnangagwa only embraced the use of social as he longer had access to the exploited media in Zimbabwe where he could defend himself and speak out against Mugabe. Additionally, he has had to keep up with his main

opponent Nelson Chamisa who is very much at home on social media. Despite this Mnangagwa's use of social media does not inspire. Instead, he has only encouraged the use of social media to disrupt online debates and frustrate criticism against himself and his government (Mwareya, 2019). In Mnangagwa's use of his Twitter account he sounds mechanical, devoid of emotion and divorced from the reality of the many Zimbabweans he leads possibly because of his claims that he is not technologically astute.

Additionally, Mnangagwa's social media use is partly due to that it is now a requisite constituent of elections across Africa (Ndlela, 2020). However, most African politicians appear to use Twitter as a one-way means of churning out propaganda. In some instances, African politicians take punitive measures against the use of social media if they suspect their opponents are using it to sow dissent (Mapenzauswa, 2019). Most of Africa's politicians and rulers are now online and on Twitter as they have realised the power of social media in modern-day political discourse (see Figure 1.32 which displays the African politicians on Twitter in 2017). They embrace social media as way of wooing the millions of citizens who are often unhappy with their governance. "While canvassing techniques such as rallies, door-to-door and radio are still prevalent in most countries, social media's influence is on the rise, especially in those countries with increased Internet penetration" (Ndlela, 2020: 32). Enitiate conducted a study in 2017 to ascertain whether the Presidents of most democratic countries embraced social media more. They found direct correlations only for Gabon and Guinea (2 out of 18) and the correlation for Rwanda was almost inverse (see Fig.1.33).

Fig.1.32.

Twitter's Top 18 African Heads of States - Aug 2017 : Twitter Followers

#	Country	Head of State	Twitter Handle	Followers	Verified?
1	Kenya	Uhuru Kenyatta	@ukenyatta	2,290,000	Y
2	Rwanda	Paul Kagame	@paulkagame	1,690,000	Y
3	Egypt	Abdel Fattah el-Sisi	@alsisiofficial	1,550,000	Y
4	Nigeria	Muhammadu Buhari	@mbuhari	1,080,000	Y
5	Uganda	Yoweri Museveni	@KagutaMuseveni	474,000	Y
6	South Africa	Jacob Zuma	@sapresident	428,000	Y
7	Ghana	Nana Akufo-Addo	@NAkufoAddo	301,000	Y
8	Tanzania	John Magufuli	@magufulijp	296,000	Y
9	Ivory Coast	Alassane Ouattara	@adosolutions	249,000	N
10	Senegal	Macky Sall	@macky_sall	204,000	Y
11	Cameroon	President Paul Biya	@PR_Paul_Biya	189,000	N
12	Gabon	Ali Bongo Ondimba	@presidentabo	69,300	Y
13	Burundi	Pierre Nkurunziza	@pnkurunziza	58,600	Y
14	Burkina Faso		@rochkaborepf	36,700	Y
15	Tunisia	Beji Caid Essebsi	@bejiceofficial	33,300	N
16	Guinea	Alpha Condé	@prof_alphaconde	17,900	N
17	Togo	Faure E. Gnassingbe	@fegnassingbe	15,400	N
18	Niger	Mahamadou Issoufou	@issoufoumhm	12,400	N

Twitter Followers

Fig.1.33.

Country	Head of State	Followers	Ranking: Followers	Country Democracy Index - Economist	Ranking: Country Democracy Index
South Africa	Jacob Zuma	428,000	6	7.41	1
Ghana	Nana Akufo-Addo	301,000	7	6.75	2
Tunisia	Beji Caid Essebsi	33,300	15	6.4	3
Senegal	Macky Sall	204,000	10	6.21	4
Tanzania	John Magufuli	296,000	8	5.76	5
Kenya	Uhuru Kenyatta	2,290,000	1	5.53	6
Uganda	Yoweri Museveni	474,000	5	5.26	7
Burkina Faso		36,700	14	4.7	8
Nigeria	Muhammadu Buhari	1,080,000	4	4.5	9
Niger	Mahamadou Issoufou	12,400	18	3.96	10
Ivory Coast	Alassane Ouattara	249,000	9	3.81	11
Gabon	Ali Bongo Ondimba	69,300	12	3.74	12
Cameroon	President Paul Biya	189,000	11	3.46	13
Togo	Faure E. Gnassingbe	15,400	17	3.32	14
Egypt	Abdel Fattah el-Sisi	1,550,000	3	3.31	15
Guinea	Alpha Condé	17,900	16	3.14	16
Rwanda	Paul Kagame	1,690,000	2	3.07	17
Burundi	Pierre Nkurunziza	58,600	13	2.4	18

Democracy Index

2. Vote rigging!

Zimbabwe's elections at the turn of the millennium have been largely contested with allegations of vote rigging, gerrymandering, vote-buying, and coercion made against ZANU-PF. However, the advent of new communications technologies – the Internet and mobile phones – has enabled citizens to actively participate in election campaigns and monitoring processes (Moyo, 2010). The surge in the use of the Internet led to the widespread use of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter which have since become platforms for political activism (#ThisFlag, #ThisGown, and Baba Jukwa), civil resistance (#OccupyAfricaUnitySquare and #Tajamuka/Sesijikile), and exposure of corruption in Zimbabwe. These social media platforms have also provided a discursive space for ordinary citizens to articulate their difficulties and to challenge the excesses of the government – epitomised by endemic corruption and bad governance (Mungwari and Ndhlebe, 2019).

Ahead of Zimbabwe's 2018 elections, netizens began exposing irregularities in the country's voting system using popular social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter (Muringi, 2018). Memories of past election violence were shared, and the post-election future was deliberated on. Party candidates were critically engaged and challenged on major electoral issues such as "reforms, democratisation,

preparedness of ZEC, and the non-partisanship of electoral and other state institutions" (Munoriyarwa and Chambwera, 2020: 92).

3. Religion and politics.

Dube and Nkoane (2018) argue that religious leaders have the democratic right to be involved in politics but, their involvement should be premised on emancipation, social justice, and siding with the oppressed. However, most leaders of mainstream religious organisations in Africa occupy the important role of interlocutor between state officials and their followers. This helps politicians to govern without too many overt challenges to their rule. In Zimbabwe, these church leaders are also co-opted as politically reliable activists who accept ZANU-PF's superiority. The church never criticises the party despite its obvious gross human-rights abuses (Machoko, 2013). As interlocutors, religious leaders also benefit financially due to their cooperation with state power (Haynes, 1995) and this is because of at least four common facts that affect the political cultures of third world countries. These are:

"(a) Historical external influences, especially colonialism and Westernization, leading to myriad social, economic and political changes.

(b) Contemporary international diffusion effects - notably concerns with democracy, human and women's rights and the health of the natural environment, helping mould contemporary political agendas.

(c) Institutional socialization of political elites in, inter alia, higher education establishments, trade unions, and the armed forces.

(d) Traditionally similar styles and outcomes of political leadership - personalist, neo-patrimonial, one-party, and military governments" (Haynes, 2016: 4).

Maybe these factors are why most Africans citizens understand and interpret the world through the prism of religion as they find it as a mode of apprehending reality (Ellis and Ter Haar, 2007). Therefore, discourses dominated by religion can be expressed more freely than those dominated by politics. Religious freedoms appear to "legally and practically hold priority over media and political freedoms, which are strongly restricted in some African countries such as Ethiopia, Rwanda, Sudan and Eritrea" (Abbink, 2014: 9).

4. Elections and the judiciary.

Zimbabwe's 2018 presidential election was ultimately decided by the country's Constitutional Court. Ahead of the sitting, the opposition and ordinary citizens were hopeful for a favourable outcome. This was inspired by the nullification of

the 2017 Kenyan presidential elections by the Supreme Court which was a historic first in Africa. Opposition leader Raila Odinga filed a petition at the Supreme Court claiming the August polls had been rigged. Two weeks later the court invalidated the presidential election which was largely peaceful and praised by international observers. However, the Supreme Court sided with the opposition that argued that the vote had been electronically manipulated to assure a victory for Kenyatta. The Supreme Court ordered a new vote to be held within 60 days after finding the outcome had been tainted by irregularities. In 2007, Kenya's disputed presidential election had set-off bloodshed that left at least 1,300 people dead and 600,000 displaced around the country. 10 years later, the Kenyan judiciary showed fortitude and courage to avoid a similar fate as the elections were contested, again. The ruling also offered a potent display of judicial independence on a continent where courts are often under intense pressure from political leaders (de Freytas-Tamura, K. 2017).

In 2020, Malawi's Constitutional Court followed the Kenyan Supreme Courts lead and annulled the May 2019 presidential election that declared Peter Mutharika as the winner. The Constitutional Courts "ruling established that the voting process had been marred by serious irregularities. The electoral commission had also failed to address complaints before announcing results. Tally sheets lacked monitor signatures, and several accepted tally sheets had been corrected using Tipp-Ex" (The Conversation, 2020: 1). The court's decision was bold as courts throughout Africa mostly show a conspicuous reluctance to rule against powerful incumbents who frequently meddle with the independence of the judiciary.

The Conversation (2020) argues that democrats around the continent may find inspiration from the broad civil society coalitions that maintain pressure on political institutions throughout judicial processes. However, the long-term democratic consequences of the ruling remain uncertain. Research on the consequences of court interference in elections has suggested that judicial assertiveness may lead to increased trust in the judiciary. For now, the way events will unfold in the coming months will be hugely consequential for the trajectory of Malawian democracy (The Conversation, 2020). While Zimbabwe's opposition was not successful in their electoral challenge, there is hope for some countries in Africa that the judiciary will remain independent and take lawful steps to annul elections marred by irregularities.

5. Bots and algorithms.

Social media has become a dominant factor in electoral processes. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and WhatsApp have a tremendous influence in the creation,

dissemination and consumption of political content as argued by Ndlela (2020). These social media platforms are imbued with a system of software, codes, and algorithms, which manages, sorts, and ranks content into manageable levels. "The power of algorithms in filtering, ranking and selecting media content makes them a significant element in election campaigns, not just in the West but also in emerging democracies in Africa" (Ndlela, 2020: 14). However, there are debates on whether algorithms in social media lead to filter bubbles and echo chambers.

Bruns defines and states that "echo chamber comes into being when a group of participants choose to preferentially connect with each other, to the exclusion of outsiders. The more fully formed this network is (that is, the more connections are created within the group, and the more connections with outsiders are severed), the more isolated from the introduction of outside views is the group, while the views of its members are able to circulate widely within it" Bruns, 2019: 26). And "a filter bubble emerges when a group of participants, independent of the underlying network structures of their connections with others, choose to preferentially communicate with each other, to the exclusion of outsiders. The more consistently they exercise this choice, the more likely it is that participants' own views and information will circulate amongst group members, rather than any information introduced from the outside" (Bruns, 2019: 26).

In Africa, evidence has been found of social media amplifying echo chambers and filter bubbles. Echo chambers are evident in the form of Facebook groups and WhatsApp groups, based on different factors including ideological inclinations, ethnicity, political affiliations, and region. Filter bubbles have been the main conduit for misinformation and disinformation. In the Zimbabwean elections in 2018, WhatsApp reinforced the deep political polarization between the ruling ZANU-PF and the main opposition, the MDC Alliance (Ndlela, 2020).

Conclusion:

Twitter as part of the wider ecology of social media has been studied in the context of elections across a variety of disciplines because it has been found to increase voter engagement (Murthy, 2015). The data from these disciplines has also been used for studying political polarization because Twitter contains a unique audience for political elites to target (Bode and Dalrymple, 2016). Political Twitter users who are extremely interested in politics are very likely to turn out at the polls and are thus the ideal subpopulation with which elites might choose to communicate. However, we should also be wary of bots and algorithms which amplify the dissemination of fake news to influence public opinion during

elections. Bots compromise political interaction and participation on social media which undermines democratic processes (Ndlela, 2020).

Mano (2020) has identified Twitter as an emerging space for mobilising resistance to authoritarianism and failed promises from elections. Twitter conversations produce important shared references and resources for users to help frame their resistance against the African leaders. Twitter allows ordinary Africans, normally persecuted, to develop political voices, providing alternative narratives against bad leadership, before, during and after election campaigns. Ordinary citizens agitate against and ridicule those in power, raising pertinent questions. Scrutiny, scepticism, and dissenting voices have found expression on Twitter regardless of the threat of arrest from governments. The Twitter users generate alternative critical narratives informed by their experience in the countries.

In Zimbabwe and Africa, Twitter has broadened political communication with netizens challenging each other and politicians on issues of democracy. Social media like Twitter has provided a discursive space for ordinary citizens to articulate their difficulties and to challenge the overindulgence of their governments. Most of Africa's politicians are now on Twitter as they realise the power of social media in modern-day political discourse. However, they sometimes take punitive measures against the use of social media if they suspect their opponents are using it to sow dissent. For example, politicians like the Zimbabwean president @edmnangagwa encourage the use of social media to disrupt online debates and frustrate criticism against himself and his government.

Zimbabweans like other citizens elsewhere in the world have adopted the use of social media for political participation and activism. In the present research, I broadly find that this uptake of social media use is useful in Zimbabwe's context which is fraught with an iniquitous political landscape. The 2018 harmonised elections presented a unique feature confirmed by Chibuwe (2020) that there was an extensive use of social media – Twitter, WhatsApp, and Facebook by citizens, politicians, and others. The battle for power by the two main contenders Chamisa and Mnangagwa fashioned fake news and smear campaigns into the defining elements of the digital propaganda battles. However, as the politicians used social media to great effect to deliver their manifestos and promises to the electorate, the results of the polls exposed that popularity on social media did not translate into actual votes. Despite this, Twitter has come to embody a space where the exchange of information and debates can occur outside of interference or regulation. Barber (2006) asserts that this ability and competence by individuals to engage with one another is the manifestation of real democracy.

Notably for Zimbabweans these spaces afforded by social media have become the most practical platforms where citizens can discuss politics without the danger of physical harm from the government. In other parts of Africa, social media has become an integral part of contemporary society and discourse. These sites serve as platforms for spreading word, for mobilization and for participation. For example, in Algeria Zaghlami (2020) argues that with mainstream media having not met the public's expectations and needs, many have turned to social media as an alternative source of information. For Algerians, much like most of the continents citizens social media has become a new space for free expression. Hence, Zaghlami (2020) posits that social media plays an active role in democratizing an Algerian public sphere that is still under state monopoly, control, and hegemony.

A crucial observation made in the present research is that access to the internet is delaying the optimistic outlook of the influence of social media on democratic processes in Zimbabwe. This delay might even turn out to a permanent hinderance I the pursuit of a digital democracy in the country. Kemp (2021) says that there were 5.01 million internet users in Zimbabwe in January 2021 against a population of 14.98 million. As such, the internet penetration stood at 33.4% with only 1.30 million citizens active social media users. This is equivalent to 8.7% of Zimbabwe's total population. Realistically, it would be difficult for only 8.7% of the population to mobilize for political change using social media platforms.

Since 2012, @263Chat which was created to encourage participation in dialogue about the social, economic, and political circumstances of Zimbabwe, social media in the country has played a key role in facilitating active political expression. The internet itself has liberated those political debates that are suppressed by Zimbabwe's plethora of restrictive media and freedom of expression laws. Another limiting factor to freedom of expression has been the enduring and historical intolerance of the ZANU-PF in dealing with dissenting voices. ZANU-PF also has monopoly over all state media (newspapers, radio, and the solitary television station – ZBC TV). This has left the Zimbabwean citizens with little to no spaces for political debate until the advent of social media accompanied by a surge in smartphone use and increased internet penetration rates in the country.

In the next Chapter (7), the findings from the analysis of Facebook during Zimbabwe's 2018 harmonised elections are presented.

CHAPTER 7.

Facebook and Democracy in Zimbabwe – Findings and Discussion.

Introduction:

Facebook use is motivated by the need to belong and the need for self-presentation (Nadkarni and Hofmann, 2012). Thus, it provides a great deal of flexibility in how people can appear and be recognised (Diepeveen, 2019). Research on the platform's democratic potential finds that people tend to share political information and engage in political discussions (Steenkamp and Hyde-Clarke, 2014). Therefore, Facebook constitutes a realization and an extension of the original public sphere (Bosch et al, 2020).

Previous studies demonstrate that Facebook use in Africa has added new dimensions to electoral campaigns. In Botswana, political parties now have access to a cheap means of transmitting information which reduces electoral inequalities. Facebook transforms political communication into two-way symmetric engagements and interactions that foster mutually beneficial relationships between stakeholders, politicians, and the electorate (Boateng et al, 2020). Most significantly, Facebook has generated interest in politics among young people (Masilo and Seabo, 2015). In Zambia's 2015 presidential by-election, Facebook was used by civil society to ensure transparency and credibility in the reporting process for the results. This established the platform as a perfect tool for disseminating authentic electoral information (Mkandawire, 2016). In Ghana, Facebook has become an open avenue to inform and engage the public as well as mobilise supporters for electoral processes and campaigns. And during election periods political parties now use Facebook for announcements, vetting, monitoring, and the declaration of vote winners (Boateng et al, 2020).

In Zimbabwe, the use of Facebook in political participation became more visible after the much-celebrated use of social media in facilitating the activism of the Arab Spring. The Facebook page Baba Jukwa which surfaced ahead of Zimbabwe's 2013 elections generated a great deal of digital enthusiasm, as discussed in chapter 2. Baba Jukwa became a counter hegemonic space for the circulation of public opinion (Mutetwa, 2015). This expanded the space for democratic political participation on Facebook (Matingwina, 2018). Since then, political parties and candidates have appropriated the platform to organise internal and external activities (Mare, 2018).

Thus, the aim of this chapter is to build on these previous findings by further examining how Facebook use during the 2018 harmonised elections contributes

to Zimbabwe's democratization processes. The chapter uses the analytics tool Netvizz to review how citizens, civil society, politicians, and political parties use Facebook in the period surrounding the 2018 elections. Fifteen Facebook pages are selected for this exercise with emphasis placed on the general outcomes, results, conclusions, and implications elicited from these profiles. The chapter concludes with a summary of the main findings.

Facebook pages are public platforms designed as spaces for communication for businesses, brands, and organizations. Since 2007, Facebook pages have also been available for political parties and politicians. The main goal of Facebook pages is to create communities of people interested in specific topics. Facebook users join communities around a Facebook page by clicking 'Like' and becoming part of its network. They can interact with the content posted on Facebook pages by commenting, liking, or sharing it (Batorski and Grzywińska, 2018).

Pages constitute the most public parts of Facebook as they can be accessed without signing into an account and are most often used by organizations for presentation, outreach, and marketing among other things. Facebook restricts public data access for third parties and researchers, meanwhile, the platform collects more and more data with users' informed consent expanding offers to advertising purposes and empowering its own capacity to make the world more open and connected. Pages provide few means to limit their audience and those that exist target individual users only. An administrator can ban users, unsubscribe them by removing their like, and delete their posts or comments.

The fifteen Facebook pages examined for this chapter are drawn from Zimbabwe's political sphere which includes the two main political contenders – ZANU-PF and MDC-Alliance – the civil society and some pages created by political party enthusiasts.

From ZANU-PF, the Facebook pages under examination are Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa, ED Mnangagwa Supporters, ZANU-PF 2018, ZANU-PF Supporters Network, and ZANU-PF UK. From the MDC-A, the Facebook pages under examination are Advocate Nelson Chamisa, MDC Alliance, MDC Zimbabwe, and the Nelson Chamisa: MDC-T President page. From the civil society, the Facebook pages under examination are Open Parly ZW, Zimbabwe Elections Support Network (ZESN), and the Zimbabwe Yadzoka Mayibuye iZimbabwe page. Other relevant Facebook pages under examination are Road to Zimbabwe Elections 2018, Zimbabwe Election 2018, and the Zimbabwe Election Watch 2018 page.

Methodology:

The Facebook pages used in this study were selected because of the levels of engagement they generated through their posts in terms of likes, shares, and comments. On Facebook, these interactive actions have distinctive meanings, for example a 'like' can be seen to represent positive feedback to the post. A 'share' means that someone wants to increase the visibility of the information contained in a post. The comments are a way of positively or negatively contributing to an online debate on the post (Quattrociocchi et al, 2016). Thus, the deliberations that are recorded through these actions extend the original public sphere and expand democratic political participation through Facebook. These actions are then considered suitable for the present study whose aim is to pursue how such political deliberations on Facebook can influence democracy in Zimbabwe and by extension Africa.

Facebook API:

Facebook has an application program interface (API) which is "a set of routines, protocols, and tools for building software applications. Basically, an API specifies how software components should interact. Additionally, APIs are used when programming graphical user interface (GUI) components" (Beal, 2020:1). The Facebook API is a platform for building applications that are available to the members of the social network of Facebook. The API "allows applications to use the social connections and profile information to make applications more involving, and to publish activities to the news feed and profile pages of Facebook, subject to individual user's privacy settings. With the API, users can add social context to their applications by utilizing profile, friend, Page, group, photo, and event data" (ProgrammableWeb, 2020:1). Facebook has since made several API changes to protect user information in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal [19]and the recent discovery of a Facebook app that leaked 120 million users' data[20] (Perez, 2018). Bruns adds that this has had a "critical effect on the ability of social media researchers to investigate phenomena such as abuse, hate speech, trolling, and disinformation campaigns, and to hold the platforms to

[19] This was a major scandal in early 2018 where Cambridge Analytica harvested the personal data of millions off people's Facebook profiles without their consent and used it for political advertising. The scandal has been described as a watershed moment in the public understanding of personal data and precipitated a 17% fall in Facebook's share price. Calls for tighter regulation of tech companies' use of personal data were made (The Economist, 2018).
[20] The brand NameTests which develops Facebook quizzes has been found to have exposed the personal information of as many as 120 million Facebook users (Statt, 2018).

account for the role that their affordances and policies might play in facilitating such dysfunction" (2019: 1544).

Applications like Netvizz make collecting large amounts of data without having to scrape them from the platforms very attractive. However, Facebook APIs are subject to the platforms fluctuating view of how sharing data and functionality with third-party developers can benefit their platform. This could potentially mean that the data obtained could be biased and unreliable. APIs are constructed for different purposes, but mainly to make platforms or services more appealing to users by adding functionality and public presence. Academic research is certainly not considered a central part of the intended audience for APIs, and this shows both in the way these interfaces work and evolve and, in the reluctance to provide any special provisions to (external) scholars (Rieder et al, 2015).

Netvizz:

Netvizz is a collection of scripts that help with downloading data from the Facebook platform for research purposes. As a data collection and extraction application it allows researchers to export data in standard file formats from different sections of Facebook. Friendship networks, groups, and pages can thus be analysed quantitatively and qualitatively with regards to demographical, post demographical, and relational characteristics (Rieder, 2013). The research tool Netvizz was freely available and designed explicitly for this type of scholarly research. Netvizz only accesses publicly available data and de-identifies user information. This allows for the reproducibility of research for the purposes of testing or expanding (Spry, 2018).

Netvizz was used to extract data from the selected Facebook pages and the statistics reveal the number of likes, reactions, comments, and shares. From these datasets the posts that have the highest number of comments were used for thematic qualitative content analysis.

Thematic content analysis is a descriptive presentation of qualitative data which takes the form of identified texts that reflect experientially on the topic of study. In this instance, the experiential texts are derived from the comments on the Facebook pages' posts. The thematic content analysis that portrays the thematic content of texts by identifying common themes in the texts provided for analysis is considered suitable for research. Thematic content analysis informs all qualitative methods as it is the most foundational of qualitative analytic procedures. A researcher's epistemological stance is objective or objectivistic when they conduct thematic content analysis (Anderson, 2007). Objectivity presupposes an independent reality that can be grasped. Hence, Ratner (2002)

posits that objectivism is the highest form of respect for the subjects we are studying. It respects their psychological reality as something meaningful and important which must be accurately comprehended. For the present study, I thus reflect on the values and objectives I bring to this research and how these affect the research project. In conducting this study, my values and objectives are therefore confirming that the anticipated influence of social media on democratization processes are likely to benefit Zimbabwean citizens and those of other African countries.

The Findings from Facebook Pages:

Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa

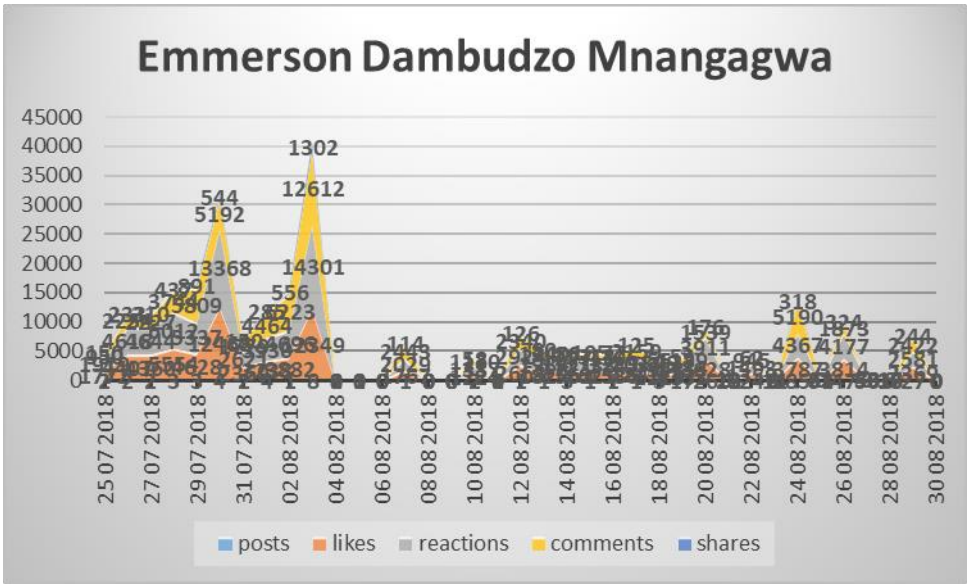
The first Facebook page under review is Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa and the posts under analysis are those from 25 July 2018 to 30 August 2018. The dataset extracted using Netvizz disclosed the pages' posts and the likes, reactions, comments, and shares. The highest number of comments (12612) was recorded on 3 August 2018. These comments were generated from the 8 posts made on the day. These posts were then shared 1302 times (see Figure 1.34). The analytics for the other 14 Facebook Pages are presented on Table 1.2.

Facebook Pages. Table 1.2.

Facebook Page	Number of posts	Number of comments	Number of shares
ED Mnangagwa Supporters	27	1,537	145
ZANU-PF 2018	7	201	20
ZANU-PF Supporters Network	9	102	6
ZANU-PF UK	5	108	20
Advocate Nelson Chamisa	3372	3	243
MDC Alliance	29	344	57
MDC Zimbabwe	11	2,546	518
Nelson Chamisa: MDC-T President Page	26	1,004	252
Open Parly ZW	16	11,291	1,270
Zimbabwe Elections Support Network (ZESN)	1	35	0
Zimbabwe Yadzoka Mayibuye iZimbabwe	13	166	245
Road to Zimbabwe Elections 2018	8	1,311	101
Zimbabwe Election 2018	6	272	41
Zimbabwe Election Watch 2018	7	8	1

Source: Netvizz.

Fig.1.34.



A thematic content analysis was conducted on only one post by Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa. The post was the following speech,

"My fellow Zimbabweans. The past nine months have been momentous. An uplifting period in the history of the Zimbabwean nation. Following a mass popular movement that led to the new dispensation, there has been an unprecedented flowering of freedom and democracy in our beloved homeland. This process culminated in the historic elections of this week. The campaign was hard-fought, competitive and at times heated. The voting itself was conducted in a peaceful and respectful manner..... I have always said that the voice of the people is the voice of God. Now that the people have spoken, I hear your call. I pledge to be a listening president, a fair president, and a responsible and inclusive leader. I thank you the people of Zimbabwe for putting your faith in me to lead you for the next five years. I pray that I am worthy of your trust. The time for politics is behind us. Now is the time for work and progress. A season for greater peace and harmony in our nation. I thank you."

Mnangagwa's post came after the army shooting of civilians in Harare which left three citizens dead. Opposition supporters became restless and impatient over the delays in releasing the results of the polls. The soldiers and police then fired live ammunition, teargas and used water cannons to quell the rising tension. The comments by some citizens revealed the prevalence of online conspiracy theorizing. Conspiracy theories are an integral element of the moral critique of the ZANU-PF government, and they are presented as proof of their debauchery

(Karekwaivanane, 2019). Mnangagwa's post did not mention the army shooting and the comments suggested that he was not in charge of the country, rather his deputy president the retired general of the Zimbabwe Defence Forces (ZDF) Constantino Chiwenga was the one in charge.

"Someone is saying ED does not know who ordered the security forces to beat, kill and abduct mdc officials and supporters!! and he wants to know whom, here is the thing ,in November the army General helped ED out of the country after he got fired by Bob, brought hm bck aftr they defused the cabal (G40) ,forced the party to reinstate him as a member ,and then automatically he became the president, meaning he is calling the shots....security forces cn not jst take it upon themselves to kill and abduct without a standing order, my two cents on this one is tht General is running the show in this country ,ED is part of General's plan."

In other comments on the post, Mnangagwa is also asked to restrain his deputy president as the army is abusing citizens.

"Dear Ed, may you please put your vp in check, tell him to send the army to the barracks. Why are they beating people at night in high density suburbs of harare and harassing young people in rural areas for voting for Chamisa? i thought you guys should be celebrating".

Mnangagwa vows to be a listening president, "Now that the people have spoken, I hear your call. I pledge to be a listening president, a fair president and a responsible and inclusive leader". If he follows through with this listening, this can improve his governments' claims to legitimacy. Democratic politics also require listening as a means of connecting parties in conflict (ZANU-PF and MDC-A) with one another to make politics possible and for a more effective resolution of political conflict. Finally, listening can lead to the capacity to empower and include if there is a better understanding of the needs of citizens (Dobson, 2012).

ED Mnangagwa Supporters

Netvizz was used to extract data for analysis from ED Mnangagwa Supporters page and the data set was 23 July 2018 to 30 August 2018. The statistics revealed that on 22 August 2018, the page posted 27 times, and this generated 1537 comments and 145 shares (See Table 1.3). The name of the page indicates that it is designed to support Mnangagwa in all his political endeavours. Therefore, there is an expectation that the comments section will resemble an echo chamber. An echo chamber is where "people tend to seek political information that is aligned with their beliefs or where they discuss political issues and candidates with other citizens who are also in support of those issues and candidates" (Semaan et al,

2014: 1410). However, the comments on the 27 posts submit that the page supports the interactional dimensions of a deliberative democracy where there is interaction between people. A deliberative democracy which is also known as political deliberation is the process where citizens voluntarily and freely participate in discussions on public issues (Semaan et al, 2014). Citizens who support either ZANU-PF or MDC-A participate in the discussions initiated by the posts on the ED Mnangagwa Supporters Facebook page.

An example of a response to the pro-ZANU-PF page by an someone assumed to be a Chamisa supporter is as follows –

A perceived Chamisa supporter responding to the post; "CHAMISA IS A CONMAN HE ONLY SHOWED THE TOP V11 FORM TO THE JOURNALISTS THE REST WERE USELESS PAPERS" says "Admin conman unomuziva iwe. Describe your leaders tione. Nxaaaaaaaaaa, Rega ndinyarare Zanu yese denga muchariona muriku gehena" [Admin do you really know a conman? Describe your leaders let's see. Let me keep quiet, you will see ZANU-PD's heaven in hell]

Other examples of interactional dimensions of a deliberative democracy found in the comments are as follows –

Someone perceived to be a ZANU-PF supporter says "ED pfeee .....pwamisa pwamisa munhu ane hutsinye kuyenda kuno mobilizer ma sanctions baloyi Mtakhathi" [ED pfeee Chamisa is a cruel man who went to mobilize for sanctions. Such a wizard!]

and another one comments saying "ED pfee kuda kana kusada ndozvo" [ED pfee whether you like it or not].

A neutral commentator says "Lolo im not Supporting Chamisa not Even Zanu nkuti zvese pazviri hazvindipi chikafu kana mari.But iwe kana uchi benefitor kwaziri contiue asi chandoziva ndechekuti chese chinobhuruka chinomhara" [Lolo I don't support Chamisa or ZANU-PF because they both won't give me food or money but, if you benefit from it continue supporting it. All I know is that one day it will come to an end].

These comments allude to that the ED Mnangagwa Supporters Facebook page provides a space for the practice of a deliberative democracy where citizens with different political links voluntarily and freely participate in discussions on public issues.

Zimbabwe is a patriarchal society where women are infantilised and there is widespread online and offline sexist harassment. Mateveke and Chikafa-Chipiro (2020) find that in country's political landscape women are stereotyped and public

comments on social media posts show narrow-mindedness in how they are depicted. Ncube and Yemurai (2020) further reference that the policing of women in online spaces feeds into the broader surveillance and regulation of women's bodies and existences that takes place in offline public spaces such as homes, workplaces, taxi ranks and other places. These findings are drawn from the country's has a long-standing bias towards women. The ED Mnangagwa Supporters page displays this deep-rooted misogyny as it likens Chamisa to a woman in the post; "Chamisa is like those women who approach the maintenance court saying the husband earns $2000 without a payslip to prove it Chamisa lied to the nation that he won by 56% apa he can't even prove he was robbed of 30000 votes to force a runoff".

There is only one comment that calls out this misogyny which says "insult to woman hey. stop it" Other comments follow the posts' misogynistic reasoning by responding to it and saying, "The court would ask father of the child the payslip, wouldn't it?", while other comments buttress the misogyny by commenting that "Also saying the child belongs a certain man but at the same time refusing to have a DNA test."

ZANU-PF 2018

On the ZANU-PF 2018 Facebook page Netvizz extracted data from 23 July 2018 to 30 August 2018. The data set revealed that the page posted 7 times and the statistics displayed that the highest number of comments (201) and shares (20) were from 2 posts on 31 July 2018. One of the seven posts was "ED Pfee!!" which was fashioned by supporters of Mnangagwa ahead of the elections to endorse him and on social media it was used as #EDpfee. "ED Pfee!!" was posted on 24 August 2018 but, it only generated 23 comments. Most of the comments were obscene, written in Shona, and aimed at Mnangagwa and ZANU-PF.

The posts say "These MDC supporters never learn. All Election results since 2000 have always started with them celebrating when results start coming in then as more results come in, they enter electoral grief mode. History is repeating itself! #EDpfeeeeeeeee #EDINAUGURATION2018" and another one shares some results from the contested areas "Results announced so far by ZEC *Marondera west* MDC A. 5000 Zanu...7019 *Mudzi* MDCA.2173 Zanu...14575 *Masvingo South* MDCA...353 Zanu...9228 *Gwanda South* MDCA...10360 Zanu...9060 *Masvingo West* MDCA...4694 Zanu...9212 *Hwedza South* MDCA...2101 Zanu...9525 *Chiredzi East* MDCA...3889 Zanu...11052 Mozoti hee heee!"

Some comments disputed these results by replying to the post that the results were fraudulent "Honestly these rigged results who believes this. Well done

President Nelson Chamisa" and "They were rigged that's true." In contrast, one comment says "Guys I'm a South African but let us salute the sitting President. Firstly, for removing Uncle Rob and secondly for making these elections possible and free and fair. I think MDC should start to accept defeat and not complain or accuse Zanu of rigging. I think it's not fair".

These comments point to Zimbabwe's electoral system which is fine tuned to influence a certain voting pattern that depicts electoral fraud and vote rigging. Moreover, there have always been accusations of voters' roll irregularities, violence, and intimidation, gerrymandering, vote buying, ghost voters, counting irregularities and the irregular dominance of ZANU-PF over the whole process of voting (Chigora and Nciizah, 2007). Ahead of the 2013 polls ZANU-PF faced allegations of electoral fraud as the party applied gerrymandering tactics – introducing more constituencies in its strongholds – to win more seats (Dube and Makaye, 2013). It is highly likely that these same accusations of voter fraud and the subsequent wrangling over the final electoral results will occur in the 2018 elections.

ZANU-PF Supporters Network

The data set from the ZANU-PF Supporters Network Facebook page was extracted using Netvizz on 30 August 2018. The statistics are from the posts between 23 July 2018 and 29 August 2018. The highest number of comments from the page are from 9 posts posted on 31 July 2018 and they generated 102 comments and 6 shares.

Most of the posts on 31 July 2018 shared the results of the polls –

"Results so far, we get this. Shurugwi north ZANU PF.: 16083 MDC alliance: 10328 Zvimba north ZANU PF :12084 MDC alliance: 2345 Gutu North ZANU PF: 7000 MDC alliance: 3000 Hurungwe East ZANU PF.: 15119 MDC alliance: 2725 Mtoko East ZANU PF: 6085 MDC alliance: 924 #ElectionsZW"

"The following authentic results so far. I spoke to leadership in the provinces at Command Centres. 1. Masvingo: Zanupf 24 seats MDC Alliance 2 seats 2. Mash East: Zanupf all seats except one Marondera City to MDC Alliance 3. Mash Central: All 18 seats to Zanupf 4. Mash West: Zanupf 18 seats. MDC Alliance 3 5. Midlands: Zanupf 25 seats MDC Alliance 3 seats. I will deliver more later by Cde Mudumi..."

Most of the comments on these posts used the slogan ED Pfee to signal their approval of ZANU-PF winning most of the seats in the results being posted by the page. And, in the only post which did not share results which said, "I'm smelling the victory oana ED pfeee" the majority of comments shared the same views with

some saying, “I smell so as well”, “ED chiwororo. huchi baba” [ED is the best, he is like honey baba] and “That is politics, nhasi vamwe vanopinda mumachira, pfeeeee” [That is politics, today some are going to be forced to sleep]

Many people seek information that supports their current convictions and Quattrociocchi et al (2016) call this confirmation bias. Confirmation bias affects decisions about whether to spread content and this creates informational cascades within identifiable communities. On social media, users tend to select information that adhere to their system of beliefs and to form polarized groups of like-minded people (Bessi, 2016). Hence, Semaan et al assert that public sphere scholars widely share the view that the internet is an “echo chamber in which people tend to seek political information that is aligned with their beliefs or discuss political issues and candidates with citizens who are also in support of those issues and candidates” (2014: 1410). Facebook users are highly polarized, and this creates largely closed, mostly non-interacting communities centred on different narratives, the echo chambers. Additionally, Liberini et al (2020) find that learning about politics on Facebook does not make voters more politically informed, but rather makes them more likely to stick with the voting choices and intentions they already hold.

Thus, in drawing from the nature of the comments made in the posts by ZANU-PF Supporters Network, the page constitutes of both an echo chamber and filter bubble. Echo chambers occur “when a group of participants choose to preferentially connect with each other, to the exclusion of outsiders” (Bruns, 2019: 26). As the groups’ network gets fully formed, it gets more isolated from the introduction of outside views but, the views of its members can circulate widely within it. Hence, the echo chamber theory hypothesizes that “political polarization is amplified on social media where individuals are selectively exposed almost solely to like-minded content and networks in terms of preferences and ideologies” (Liberini et al, 2020: 20). Therefore, in the ZANU-PF aligned Facebook pages filter bubbles emerge as “a group of participants choose to preferentially communicate with each other, to the exclusion of outsiders (e.g., by comments on Facebook, @mentions on Twitter, etc.)” (Bruns, 2019: 29).

We find evidence of an echo chamber and a filter bubble through the comments being made in the comments of the posts made by the ZANU-PF Supporters Network Facebook page. Consequentially, these actions which dominate information cascades might affect public debates on socially relevant issues (Del Vicario et al, 2016).

ZANU-PF UK

From the data set extracted using Netvizz on the ZANU-PF UK Facebook page, the statistics revealed that the highest number of comments (108) was recorded on 24 August 2018. The data set is from posts between 23 July 2018 and 30 August 2018. The comments were generated from 5 posts made on the day and were shared 20 times.

Three of these posts were sharing news stories from news websites such as the British Broadcasting Cooperation (BBC) and Zimbabwe's Chronicle newspaper. From the BBC we have a story about President of United States of America, Donald Trumps' proposed impeachment (https://www.google.co.uk/amp/s/www.bbc.co.uk/news/amp/world-us-canada-45285585).

Some comments from probable MDC-A supports say, "Who cares about Trump? tell us how you are going to rig the economy" and "We don't care about Trump, he is not Zimbabwean tell us how you are going to build Zimbabwe economy." The response by someone who likely a ZANU-PF supporter is, "If you don't care about Trump why did your leaders go to America to lobby for sanctions against your country Zimbabwe?"

ZANU-PF has always accused the MDC-A and its civil society allies for the sanctions, instituted by the EU, on Zimbabwe. However, these sanctions are a result of Mugabe's ZANU-PF failing to meet fair election procedures in the 2002 polls. The 2002 election saw the ZANU-PF government embark on a violent repression of the civil society and opposition parties (Giumelli, and Kruliš, 2012).

The other stories are from the Chronicle newspaper and are about ZANU-PF's calling on Zimbabweans to remain peaceful and accept the Constitutional Court's verdict to be delivered later on that day (http://www.chronicle.co.zw/calls-for-calm-ahead-of-concourt-ruling/).

The comments, "Nonsense EDiot because murikuziva kuti judgement will not be fair" [Nonsense EDiot because you know that the judgement won't be fair] and "U talk as if u no de judgment nd ll u keep yo promise if the results goes against u" display a distrust in Zimbabwe's judiciary who always coddle ZANU-PF.

The other story, also on The Chronicle, is about the interference of President Trump in South Africa's proposed land reform program (http://www.chronicle.co.zw/trump-under-fire-over-south-africa-land-reform/).

Zimbabwe's fast-tracked land reform led to export earnings from commercial agriculture suffering and the wider Zimbabwean economy plummeted. The

national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) fell by almost 50 percent between 2000 and 2008. To this day, unemployment remains above 90 percent. State violence intensified and election fraud became more blatant. Outbreaks of cholera and typhoid are prevalent due to a breakdown of basic infrastructure. By late 2008, Zimbabwe's humanitarian crisis saw half the population needing food aid (King, 2012).

Thus, the comments warn that a fast-tracked land reform is a mistake, but it is long overdue and should be done systematically, "This has been long overdue, but it must be done systematically. We have politicians trapped by greed demon using and misleading majority of our less political knowledgeable citizens to get rich…Eff is totally here for confusions to confused society…and their leader is a danger to SA. the gods of SA must stop this hypocrite" and "Ed himself claimed that fast tracking land redistribution was a blunder, but you are here encouraging South Africans to do the same mistake which will benefit those who are political connected whilst the majority are suffering."

Advocate Nelson Chamisa

The data set obtained using Netvizz reveals that the Advocate Nelson Chamisa Facebook page had the highest number of comments (3372) on 28 July 2018. The comments were generated from 3 Facebook Live video posts. These video posts were shared 243 times. MDC-A supporters were encouraged to Like and Follow the proceedings on https://www.facebook.com/TechnoMagTv/videos/291810101382936/ if they could not physically attend the Harare rally. The comments revealed that Chamisa and MDC-A supporters were, "Watching from tsabong in Botswana", "Watching from Cape Town…", "Watching from Australia". Facebook Live is a video feature on that allows people, public figures, and pages to share live videos with their followers and friends on Facebook. Broadcasts can be made to large audiences and interaction with viewers occurs in real time. Using the feature means that followers can field questions and reactions can be used to gauge how the broadcast is being received. Followers can receive notifications when you go live so that they know when to tune in to the broadcasts at the right time (Facebook, 2019).

The 2018 elections were the first in a very long without the two protagonists who have dominated and shaped much of Zimbabwe's electoral landscape – Mugabe and Tsvangirai. The comments reveal that they are still very much etched in Zimbabwe's political folklore. Some remark that they are sure Mugabe will vote for the MDC-A, "1 vote m sure of….shall be cast by RG in favour of us" and others

endorse this line of thought "Nt just one my dear count the whole lot of Mugabes labakhwenyana bakhona lol funny how things turn in Zim politics ahhh ka1 wena Tshisa mpama tshisa" [Not just one dear, count the whole lot even Mugabe's sons-in-law lol funny how things turn in Zim politics]. Others even question why Mugabe did not go to his rural home, Zvimba, to campaign for Chamisa "Yeye kuboZvimba why engasizamanga ngokuyicampaign umdala lo, uyizondile ishamwari yakhe uED hayi kancani who wuld have thought UMgabe engavotela iMDC kkkk ndapererwa zvangu" [He should have gone to Zvimba and campaign. He really hates his friend Emmerson Mnangagwa. Who wold have thought that Mugabe would ever vote for the MDC? I am very surprised]. On Tsvangirai it was hoped he could see Chamisa's impact from his grave, "I hope Tsvangirai is seeing this from his grave!" and some said, "President Tsvangirai must be proud." There was high praise for Tsvangirai's vision and choice of successor, "I salute Morgan Richard Tsvangirai. He made it possible by Choosing 3 Vice Presidents he had a plot in that NELSON was his preferred choice to take over from him, but age was not on his side on the event that he perished before election time. Mudzuri was a stop gap measure in case The Zim immature electorate might not accept Khupe."

Some comments indicate that there is an improvement in the electoral conditions, "To be honest it's been great to listen to all teams as they have rallied and campaigned. With minimal violence and freedom of speech. If that is not progress, then I don't know." ZANU-PF is ridiculed and mocked, "Ndaona vanhu vari kuti Ed pfeee pano, asi ku feed yeZanu hakusi kunakidza?" [I saw people saying ED pfee here, isn't ZANU-PF's Facebook Live stream interesting for them?]. someone delights at the large numbers at the rally, "Chinondifadza ndechekuti hapana amanikidzwa kuenda kufreedom square ende taenda nekuda CHAMISAAAAAAAAAAA wedu tasiyana nevaya vayaaaaa" [What makes me happy is that no one was forced to attend the rally at Freedom Square, we all went because of our belief in Chamisa]. ZANU-PF is notorious for bussing supporters and forcing school children to attend its rallies.

MDC Alliance

The data set obtained by using Netvizz was from 23 July 2018 to 26 August 2018. The statistics reveal that the MDC Alliances' peak activity is recorded on 31 July 2018 with the page posting 29 times. The highest number of comments comes from these 29 posts at 344 and the posts are shared 57 times. Ahead of Zimbabwe's 2013 elections political parties and individual politicians used Facebook for mobilising first-time voters. The opposition political parties and candidates were very active on Facebook as most of their loyal supporters were urbanities (Mare, 2018). Facebook use by Zimbabwe's opposition politicians has

since become vital since they are denied access to mainstream media. As much of the formal mainstream media is restricted and is partisan in most African countries, this affects their role in election monitoring and observation. Therefore, for opposing politicians the transparency and credibility in election results reporting remain elusive (Mkandawire, 2016). Social networks like Facebook now occupy a central role in the process of reporting election results. The 29 posts made by the MDC Alliance Facebook page – a day after the voting – are result updates on the outcome of the votes. Live streams and videos of vote counting, and the announcing of results are also part of the posts made by the page.

The comments are mostly celebratory and point to great optimism that Chamisa and the MDC Alliance will resoundingly win the 2018 polls. Some comments however, display uncertainty over the results being posted by the page, "How authentic are these results?", "These Are Fake Results, wait For Da Real Ones" and "There Is Nothing Wrong Abt Dreaming,but U Have To Wake Up From Dat Dream Becoz Zec Is Abt To Give Real Results Not Fake Ones."

The next Facebook page under thematic content analysis is the MDC Zimbabwe Facebook page. Since its formation in 1999, the MDC has split into several different formations. In 2005, the then Secretary-General, Welshman Ncube, and others, left to form another MDC. The reason for the split was that they differed with the late Morgan Tsvangirai over participation in Senate elections. Tsvangirai's MDC would be now known as MDC-T (Tsvangirai) and Ncube's MDC would be known as MDC-N (Ncube). Another split would occur in 2014 when the MDC-T Secretary-General, Tendai Biti and others formed MDC Renewal (Nkala, 2018). After the death of Tsvangirai, the MDC split again for a new formation led by one of the Vice-Presidents' of the party Thokozani Khupe. Khupe argued that a faction led by another Vice-President, Nelson Chamisa, assumed the leadership of the party before Tsvangirai was laid to rest (Dube, 2018).

Chamisa contested as the MDC-T's presidential candidate in the 2018 elections under the MDC Alliance electoral pact. After the election, the MDC-T re-united with two other splinter groups of the original party, MDC-N and PDP to form a single party using the original name, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) (Vambe, 2018). Chamisa was subsequently elected president of the party at the MDC Congress held in May 2019 (Mutasa, 2019).

MDC Zimbabwe

The statistics from the MDC Zimbabwe Facebook page data set reveal that on 31 July 2018 there were 2546 comments from 11 posts which were shared 518 times.

One of the posts says, “Be vigilant Zimbabweans. Make sure you capture your polling stations results as posted outside your polling station. There are people concocting numbers and spreading them. Do not be distracted! Remain focused and defend your votes!” The comments reveal sentiments of despondency, “Ed has won (rigged) guys. I guess the devil always wins in Zimbabwe” and contempt of rural voters, “Not looking good at all!! The Rural folks are just too dumb.”

Boone and Wahman (2015) posit that the introduction of multipartyism saw most of the longstanding ruling parties draw heavily on rural constituencies to gather votes. The return of multiparty competition sees old political party’s fall-back to their rural electoral strongholds as they face organized waves of challenge from the cities. In Zimbabwe, 58 out of a total of 63 districts are rural and this makes the rural vote the most important and sought after. Zimbabwe’s rural vote is primarily influenced by food security and access to and benefit from the land (Ncube, 2018). As rural citizens face food insecurity, they exchange their votes for maize seeds and fertilizer which is crookedly distributed by the state. Also, rural Zimbabwe has been historically targeted for election violence where innocent villagers are tortured, kidnapped, and gruesomely murdered as ZANU-PF seeks to cling onto power.

Another post by the MDC Zimbabwe Facebook page says “Are you listening to the results being announced? Total votes cast higher than total registered voters. Zimbabweans we must defend our votes our democracy #openBVR #Openballot.”

The comments show their supporters desperation and willingness to take ZANU-PF head on, “Pls MDC BE SERIOUS ISU TANETA NEMA ELECTIONS KANA ZVAVA ZVEHONDO TIUDZEI PLS WE ARE READY TO DIE FOR THIS COUNTRY” [Please MDC be serious, we are tired of elections. If you want us to go to war tell us, we are ready to die for this country] and “Mdc if u just keep quiet panyaya iyi or please adress us kt toenda kunotrainwa kupi hondo yacho otherwise handizombovhoti futi cz vhoti yangu haingarasikire mahara” [MDC do not remain silent about this injustice. Please address us about where we can go for war training, otherwise I will never vote for you again because my vote goes to waste].

The comments reveal MDC’s violent streak. In 2019, the Zimbabwe Peace Project (ZPP) recorded various instances of intra party violence within the MDC. Violent acts are mostly carried out by party youths who are aligned to different factions in the party. In March 2019, there were violent clashes between youths affiliated to the MDC Secretary-General Douglas Mwonzora and those affiliated to the party president, Chamisa, during ward elections in Chitungwiza. At the funeral of the late MDC-T president, Tsvangirai, the then Vice President Thokozani Khupe and

Secretary-General were attacked by party youths. Khupe and Mwonzora sought refuge in a grass thatched hut which the youths threatened to torch (ZPP, 2019).

Nelson Chamisa: MDC-T President

The Nelson Chamisa: MDC-T President Facebook data set reveals that on 2 August 2018 the page posts 26 times. These posts are shared 252 times and generate 1004 comments. The posts made on the day also include live streams and videos.

The selected post for analysis from the page, presumably from Chamisa, says, "THANK YOU, ZIMBABWE …I'm humbled by the support you have given to me as a Presidential Candidate. We have won the popular vote. You voted for total Change in this past election! We have won this one together. No amount of results manipulation will alter your WILL #Godisinit".

However, some of the comments advise and encourage Chamisa to concede defeat, "Wakakundwa bvuma tipewo mukana. Ukuda kupa bad signal kuti sanction risabiswe. Siyana nesu" [You were defeated, give us a chance. You want to give a bad signal to lobby for the removal of sanctions, leave us alone] and "Well-tried Chamisa, you lost accept it maybe you must start preparing for the next elections i.e., 2023, maybe you might win only if ED fail to deliver his promises and if he failed to snatch your supporters because I have a feeling, he is going to prove you wrong."

These comments point to voter apathy and cynicism which can be traced back to the 2005 Senate elections which recorded a 19.48% voter turnout which was the lowest in the history of the country since 1980. Apathy in politics is the withdrawal of citizen participation in an electoral process (Chiroro, 2005). The comments made on the post show that the electorates are experiencing voter fatigue as they are often required to keep voting despite not being able to dislodge ZANU-PF. Chiroro (2005) says that voter apathy causes notoriously low voter turnout rates. From the other Facebook pages analysed, this research has noted that some of the comments are made by voters who are threatening to never vote again because their votes appear to never bring the desired change.

Masuku (2017) argues that the vote rigging rhetoric which is now a defining feature of Zimbabwe's opposition politics has had the negative effect of adversely inculcating a prevalent voter apathy syndrome. There is also a notable political participation fatigue amongst the bulk of the opposition party supporters and sympathizers (Chirimumimba, 2017). In the 2013 elections, only 3.1 million voters turned up at the polls in a country which had 13 million people at the time (Masuku, 2017). Thus, Masuku (2017) theorises that the persistence of vote rigging

monotony by opposition parties in Zimbabwe has assisted in intensifying the spread of defeatist and lethargic dispositions amongst their supporters.

Open Parly ZW

The Open Parly ZW (Open Parliament of Zimbabwe) was created to foster more engagement between decision makers and citizens to facilitate a better society for young Zimbabweans. The data set from Open Parly ZW shows that on 2 August 2018, the page made 16 posts which were shared 1270 times and generated 11291 comments. The 16 posts were Facebook Live videos, and live streams of various press conferences being held in the capital, Harare, by Chamisa, the War Veteran's Association, the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, ZANU-PF Youth League and ZANU-PF. The high volume of conferences on the day is in response to the shooting of civilians by the army in the Harare CBD on 1 August 2018.

The comments on the ZANU-PF Youth League conference exhibited a general fatigue with the many press conferences happening in the country, and the dislike of the Youth League. Some said, "in times like these everybody be holding press conferences even clueless guys"; "Zimbabwe's unemployment rate is at 80%. Let it sink in while you watch this ZANU orchestrated failed attempt at brainwashing us", "Oh lawd They hold pressers about pressers to talk about what was said in the previous presser and inform us of the next presser. ... Taneta nemaPresser isu" and, "You know you are living in deranged times when ZANU YouThiefs call a press conference. What is crazy about this country is the amount of these shitty so-called press Conferences. Everyone who wants to pass wind, they call a press conference……."

Chamisa's press conference had comments reminding him that they did not vote for him, "Internet Tallies in Zim are fiction Nelson. Facebook likes are not votes. Us young people saw through your lies and voted for ED", "Not everyone voted for you Chamisa. Personally, I did not vote for you" and, "I did not vote for you Nelson. Accept the will of the majority and call of your mobs. Nobody should die for you."

In ZANU-PF's conference they are criticised for worrying about the damage to property instead of the loss of human lives at the hands of soldiers, "Idzi mhata idzi. Property!!!! What does property have to do with people's lives lost" and, "I cannot even contain myself watching this. He sounds ignorant. And why the fuc* is he all worried about the "damage done to property" FOH."

The War Veterans are reminded that they are overrated and equally suffer under ZANU-PF's misrule like the rest of the citizens, "War vets are overrated in this

modern Zimbabwe" and "The rest of war veterans are suffering, stop trying to hold us hostage all the time. Zimbabwe doesn't belong to u".

In its quest to facilitate a better society for young Zimbabweans, Open Parly ZW assumes the role of a digital public sphere. A digital public sphere is envisioned as a communicative sphere provided online or supported by social media where participation is open and freely available to everybody who is interested. In this space matters of common concern can be discussed, and the proceedings are visible to all (Schafer, 2015). The posts by Open Parly ZW means that those Zimbabweans who are online have open, easy, and fast access to information. Moreover, participation and deliberation (through commenting) on the page means that more citizens who were previously marginalized by mainstream media are now empowered and their political opinions can be heard.

Zimbabwe Elections Support Network (ZESN)

The data set analysed from the Zimbabwe Elections Support Network (ZESN) Facebook page is from between 23 July 2018 and 25 August 2018. The statistics reveal that the page recorded the highest number of comments (35) on 19 August 2018. ZESN was formed in 2000 as a coalition of 31 non-governmental organisations to co-ordinate activities pertaining to elections. It is the country's largest non-governmental poll watchdog. The major focus of the Network is to promote democratic processes in general and free and fair elections.

The solitary post which generated the most comments was not shared. The post is a statement which says,

"The ZESN board wishes to categorically refute false claims that it has called for an urgent meeting at ZESN offices on the 23rd of August 2018 at 0900 hours. ZESN advises stakeholders and the public that contrary to the circular on social media it has not called for a meeting on 23 August. The claims in the fictitious circular are malicious and bent on tarnishing the image of the National Director and the Network hence should be treated with the contempt it deserves. On behalf of the board ZESN Board Chairperson Andrew Makoni wishes to advise that the circulating notice issued through the press is fake and has neither been issued by the board nor the board of trustees. In the discharge of its mandate ZESN maintains independence impartiality and objectivity as key values. ZESN remains committed to promoting democratic electoral processes in Zimbabwe and is unmoved by the attacks on the integrity of the Network. Official ZESN communication including statements reports and updates are issued through the Network s official media and communication channels."

ZESN released separate election results that tallied with those announced ZEC, this disproved the rigging claims made by the MDC Alliance and Chamisa. Opposition supporters criticised ZESN for siding with ZANU-PF and endorsing the results announced by the ZEC. Hence, the comments of disapproval on their post which say, “Who cares????Zanu Election Support Network. You sold your souls to Zanu PF for 30pieces of silver to give ED phony legitimacy and do the Britons' bidding. How could you stoop that low? Shame on you guys, nxa!!!” and “Zanu pf Election Support Network who cares abt yr fake independent board.”

Zimbabwe Yadzoka Mayibuye iZimbabwe

The data set for the Zimbabwe Yadzoka/ Mayibuye iZimbabwe Facebook page is from between 23 July 2018 and 30 August 2018. The statistics reveal that the highest number of comments were generated from 13 posts on 1 August 2018. These posts were shared 245 times. These posts also include graphic videos and pictures of victims of assault by the Zimbabwean police and army. The name Zimbabwe Yadzoka/ Mayibuye iZimbabwe translates to reclaiming Zimbabwe. The group say they are a ‘subaltern movement defining new grassroots politics in Zimbabwe,’ and believe that ‘people are power and ‘politicians are servants to them’.

The military is oft accused of being one of the barriers of democracy as it prevents Zimbabwe from breaking away from the corrupt and dysfunctional political system. The Conversation (2017) notes that Zimbabwe’s military has never been a neutral custodian of constitutional rule instead, it has always been a highly politicised extension of the ruling party – a party militia in effect. The political system is also heavily militarised with several key military veterans appointed to cabinet. Before the coup against Mugabe, the military’s role was confined to repressing the ruling party’s opponents and maintaining the party’s dominance. Here, the principle of civilian rule was respected even if it failed to meet any reasonable democratic standards. But with the coup, the military crossed a line and determined the outcome of power struggles within ZANU-PF (The Conversation, 2017).

One post on the Zimbabwe Yadzoka Mayibuye iZimbabwe Facebook page condemns Mnangagwa’s heavy handedness by deploying soldiers to deal with protestors and points out that Mugabe only sent the police with water cannons, “Mnangagwa the GUKURAHUNDIST is KILLING peaceful citizens in Zimbabwe. The army is shooting to kill with live ammunition. Mugabe never send SOLDIERS to shoot & kill indiscriminately at protesters he used water cannons & police.”

The comments equally condemn Mnangagwa's actions and point out the militaries and the ZANU-PF's government undemocratic nature, "Who deployed the SOLDIERS? Citizens have a right to demonstrate by our constitution & international law. In case some protesters broke the law, the police have a duty to arrest" and, "There is no justification whatsoever to deploy MILITARY to face unarmed citizens exercising their constitutional right."

Road to Zimbabwe Elections 2018

The data set used for analysis from the Road to Zimbabwe Elections 2018 Facebook page is from between 23 July 2018 and 30 August 2018. The statistics reveal that the highest number of comments (1311) is from 8 posts made on 27 July 2018 which are shared 101 times. Part of the 8 posts made on 27 July 2018 are videos captioned, "LEAKED VIDEO CONFIRMS THE STORY! Chamisa apologizes to Grace for the video of their meeting had been revealed!" and "LEAKED CCTV FOOTAGE OF GRACE AND CHAMISA MEETING."

The comments under these posts say, "Haisi face ya Chamisa...its decoy... Even dai ariye at least haisi 15 Billion" [This is not Chamisa's face, it's a decoy. Even if it was him, at least 15 billion would make us doubt him] and, "Only a fool will believe the authenticity of this video. Title should have been rephrased to "leaked...".

Samory and Mitra (2018) say that online communities play a crucial role in disseminating conspiracy theories and new theories often emerge in the aftermath of catastrophic or dramatic events. The posts made on the Road to Zimbabwe Elections 2018 Facebook page and the subsequent comments point to online conspiracy theorizing. Klein et al (2018) contend that conspiracy theories play a troubling role in political discourse. Online forums, in this case Facebook pages, provide a valuable window into everyday conspiracy theorizing, and can give a clue to the motivations and interests of those who post in such forums. Further analysis of the posts and comments on Road to Zimbabwe Elections 2018 reveals that this Facebook page is likely a creation of ZANU-PF or someone who is sympathetic to the political party. The page only exposes the alleged wrongdoing of only the MDC- Alliance or its leader Chamisa.

Zimbabwe Election 2018

The data set obtained by using Netvizz on the Zimbabwe Election 2018 Facebook page is from between 24 July 2018 and 24 August 2018. The statistics reveal that on 30 July 2018, the page made 6 posts which generated the highest number of comments (272) and shared 41 times. The posts are live result updates from the elections and pictures from citizens returning from their polling stations.

Some of these posts say, “Updates for polling station returns as they trickle in. Send us pictures of the return of your polling station”; “Please note that our WhatsApp service has stopped working. Both the number and the device cannot be recovered until tomorrow” and, “Live updates and pictures from reliable sources - note that we do not have time to verify all information before posting.”

The comments on the posts are generally citizens and the page administrator updating on the voting activities happening around the country, the situation in the polling stations, and some ask to be added to the Zimbabwe Election 2018 WhatsApp group. These are some of the comments, “I also wanna join your whatsapp grp please may you add me”, “People are now disgruntled at St. Peter's Primary School. People are saying voting is progressing too slow” and, “Voting ongoing at Mazowe citrus with long queues if mostly farm workers being witnessed. Zec chairperson Justice Chigumba voted early when at Bunnickburn in ward 20 Mazowe South. She called for peaceful elections and urged people to go out and vote.”

Zimbabwe Election Watch 2018

Netvizz was used on the Zimbabwe Election Watch 2018 Facebook page and the data obtained is from between 24 July 2018 and 22 August 2018. In this period only 7 posts are recorded from the page. The post on 15 August 2018 generates the highest number of comments (8) and is shared once. This solitary post which garnered 8 comments and 1 share is about the electoral court challenge by Chamisa at Zimbabwe’s Constitutional Court and it says,

“The Zimbabwe 2018 harmonised general elections are now in the hands of the Constitutional Court. At stake is the will of the people and with it the political and economic fate of the country. Given its recent history it is difficult to have faith in our judiciary especially when it comes to high stake political matters. But the fact that the court may have the last word on the matter presents a window of opportunity for a liberation moment. Liberation not only of the millions of Zimbabweans but also of the judiciary itself. We wait with a bated breath!”

The 8 comments say, “TRUE”; “GOD Is in control”, “TRUE”, “Now the only this we are waiting for to see that corruption we are fighting with across the country since we hav been talking abt it am sure all people all eyes on fight corruption”, “THY WILL BE DONE” “God’s time is the best!!!”, “Let's pray” and, “They must lead by example. No to corrupt officials.”

Zimbabwe’s 2018 presidential election was ultimately decided by the country’s Constitutional Court. Ahead of the sitting, the opposition and ordinary citizens

were hopeful for a favourable outcome. This was inspired by the nullification of the 2017 Kenyan presidential elections by the Supreme Court which was a historic first in Africa. The ruling also offered a potent display of judicial independence on a continent where courts are often under intense pressure from political leaders (de Freytas-Tamura, K. 2017).

Discussion and analysis of the findings:

Social media such as Facebook and Twitter have been hailed as liberative in contexts of political repression. In Zimbabwe, Facebook has emerged as an alternative public sphere that democratises political space. However, the platform can also be pulverised by irrational debates (Chibuwe and Ureke, 2016). The Facebook pages analysed demonstrated support for interactional dimensions of a deliberative democracy as citizens voluntarily and freely participated in discussions on public issues.

Facebook's liberative potential also poses potential dangers as its affordance for anonymity provides room for slander and defamation. Wang and Bates (2008) argue that most of the information produced by ordinary citizens online is trivial, silly, or wrong, deceptive, and pornographic among other social ills. Moreover, citizens tend to lose their common sense and believe all kinds of crazy tales and theories (Dean, 2003). In this study, some of the analysed Facebook pages – Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa and Road to Zimbabwe Elections 2018 – showed evidence of the citizens' propensity for online conspiracy theorizing. In a lengthy statement on the Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa Facebook page, Mnangagwa promised to be a listening president. However, there was a lack of active listening on the page. It appears that most Facebook pages administered by politicians only practice passive listening. Bosch et al (2020) say that politicians only use these invited and invented spaces of participation to monitor, predict and observe public opinion formation.

In Zimbabwe, new media has partly digitised the electoral processes and contacting practices between politicians and citizens with access to the social and mobile media internet. Mare (2018) argues that platforms such as Facebook have ambivalently created communication hierarchies and participation inequalities between the connected (mostly urbanites) and disconnected (especially rural) voters. Moreover, rather than promoting transparency, the visibility of politicians on Facebook engenders a new calibre of celebrity. Here, the politicians are transiently accessible online yet inaccessible offline (Mare, 2018).

The thematic content analysis conducted on the Zimbabwean Facebook pages reveals that Facebook has become a digital public sphere platform. Zimbabwean

citizens engage in open and free participation about matters of common concern. However, other citizens chose to preferentially connect with each other to the exclusion of outsiders thereby creating echo chambers where they are selectively exposed almost solely to like-minded content and networks in terms of preferences and ideologies (Liberini et al, 2020). There is also widespread online sexist harassment due to the country's political landscape where women are often stereotyped. This online harassment feeds into the broader surveillance and regulation of women's bodies and existences that takes place in offline public spaces such as homes, workplaces, taxi ranks and other places.

Facebooks' embedded features notably the News Feed has made the platform a "suitable venue for the development of political attitudes and behaviours even to those politically uninterested or unaffiliated" (Theocharis and Lowe, 2016: 1468). This makes the use of Facebook "soften informational inequalities between social groups, ensure broad popular awareness of key political events and, most crucially, spur us to act on that knowledge, come election day" (Chadwick, 2012: 41). This has been beneficial to Zimbabweans who now frequently use Facebook for politics which reveals how they use the internet and social media regularly and effectively. This ability to participate in society online demarcates these Zimbabweans as digital citizens. As Zimbabweans increasingly interact with the social and political environment through digital media, they enter the sphere of civic activity and develop agency (Hintz et al, 2017).

However, the political use of Facebook in Zimbabwe also betrays the absence of democratic listening by both citizens and politicians. Activity on Mnangagwa's official Facebook Page *Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa* reveals that his promise to be a 'listening president' (Nyoka, 2018) is but a rhetorical exercise. Mnangagwa characterises himself as a listening president to boost his popularity after a highly charged and controversial election replete with accusations of vote-rigging. In turn, the Zimbabwean citizens' activity on Facebook tends to be about merely contributing a 'voice', with speaking up the dominant metaphor for their online participation.

The use of Facebook in the country also reveals that Facebook divides people as much as it connects them. Vaidhyanathan partly confirms this by arguing that "the idealistic vision of people sharing more information with ever more people has not improved nations or global culture, enhanced mutual understanding, or strengthened democratic movements" (2018: 4). Additionally, in 2017, Facebook revealed that Russia-based accounts had run anti-Hillary Clinton advertisements precisely aimed at Facebook users whose demographic profiles implied a vulnerability to political propaganda. This has prompted Vaidhyanathan (2017) to

argue that we should be troubled by this fact that Facebook makes manipulation so easy because it renders political advertisements exempt from the basic accountability and transparency that healthy democracy demands. Outside of the use of Facebook political advertisements to churn political propaganda other experiences are such that, Facebook is used to disseminate extreme speech and disinformation (Whitten-Woodring et al, 2020).

The next Chapter will present on the 263Chat WhatsApp group findings and discuss its role and impact on Zimbabwe's 2018 harmonised elections.

CHAPTER 8.

WhatsApp Group(s) and Democracy in Zimbabwe – Findings and Discussion.

Introduction:

WhatsApp's simplicity, reliability and accessibility has made the application one of the largest user bases in the world with more than 1.5 billion users in over 180 countries. This also makes the application one of the most powerful digital services for political campaigning, especially in the Global South where online services are accessed mainly through mobile phones and several connectivity and bandwidth issues often thwart a rapid and fluid digital experience (Treré, 2020). WhatsApp has high penetration rates in the Global South because it is the primary venue for political conversations (Valenzuela et al, 2019) and for discussing and sharing news (Newman et al, 2019).

WhatsApp has a particularly strong penetration in rural communities where Internet is accessed mostly via smartphones. Political campaigners disseminate photos, messages, and calls to action via both large and small WhatsApp groups. In South America, Southeast Asia, and Africa participation in large WhatsApp groups constitutes most of the online communication for many users. In addition to helping politicians reach voters and constituents in areas that do not have access to the Internet, WhatsApp is also extending the reach and primacy of Facebook, who own the platform, in the democratic process in these countries (Tactical Tech, n.d).

WhatsApp effectively facilitates group activities for diverse needs, including family, social, and professional, both for ad hoc purposes and for managing prolonged projects and preserving relationships among friends and family (Malka et al, 2015). Additionally, content on WhatsApp is user driven and this frees the application from the control of big corporations and conglomerates and thus from conflict of interest and biases of owners. The application is also free from the grip of advertisers, for now, who otherwise can control the content on media channels (Farooq, 2017).

Since its release in 2009, WhatsApp has been an integral part of the protest ecologies of the many social movements that have emerged globally since 2010 (Treré, 2020). The application has played an important role in the coordination of resistance movements from Hong Kong, Brazil, Ethiopia, and Iran (Alimardani and Milan, 2018; Potnis et al, 2018; Weber et al, 2018; Lee and Chan, 2018). Previous research also demonstrates that it is has become well harnessed by political entities. Ahead of the 2017 elections in India, the pollical party Bhartiya Janta Party

(BJP) employed the use of WhatsApp for mobilization, coordination and reaching out to voters. The party formed 10 344 WhatsApp groups just to coordinate and circulate media among their party workers (Farooq, 2017).

Maros et al (2020) advance that WhatsApp groups play an important role as an information dissemination platform, especially during important social mobilization events. WhatsApp groups facilitate the dissemination of different types of content including chain messages, news, memes, and rumours (Resende et al, 2019). However, there are rising concerns over the spread of misinformation in WhatsApp groups and the potential impact on political polarization, hindrance of public debate and fostering acts of political violence (Machado et al, 2019).

Hitchen et al (2019) argue that WhatsApp is the most popular messaging application in 40 African countries due to its low cost, encrypted messages, and the ability to easily share messages with both individuals and groups. Its growing penetration means that the applications' political influence is expanding rapidly. Political leaders have been quick to understand the potential of WhatsApp and to adapt it to mobilise voters. Politicians also use the application to carry messages that promote a candidate's credentials and manifesto pledges and to coordinate campaign events. WhatsApp is now a key mechanism through which political leaders seek to communicate with their campaign teams and supporters.

An understanding of the role of WhatsApp groups as social media tools used in the delivery of change in the Zimbabwe political ecology is still rudimentary. However, research establishes that WhatsApp has brought an affordable communication platform although it has also become subject to abuse by those who take advantage of its distinct features. Its ability to offer one on one chats and one to many chats in real time has made it become a platform of choice in communicating all sorts of information that range from being useful, insulting, abusive; to outright jokes and absolute trivia, hoaxes, and porn (Chiridza et al, 2016). In education, Zimbabwean WhatsApp groups are utilised as a vehicle for the dissemination of new syllabuses, syllabus interpretation, sharing of reading material as well as staff development (Tarisayi and Manhibi, 2017). Other studies also find that WhatsApp contributes to domestic violence due to the misuse of the platform by couples as the application engenders feelings of mistrust, feelings of neglect and jealousy among them (Shiri and Chigunwe, 2017).

In sum, this Chapter aims to build on these previous assertions and findings and to further examine how Zimbabwean citizens utilise WhatsApp groups during electoral periods.

Methodology:

This section describes the dataset used in this study as well as the methods used to process and analyse the WhatsApp data obtained. One of the main challenges of doing research on WhatsApp is the selection of methodology because of the relatively closed nature of WhatsApp groups. Groups on WhatsApp are only accessible by invitation and only from the administrator of each group. Therefore, it is difficult for researchers to gain access unless they are already part of the groups of interest. By this reasoning it is no surprise that such technical features may evoke and inform the research design as well as types of methods (Pang and Woo, 2020).

The WhatsApp Dataset:

As a researcher I sought permission to join the 263Chat WhatsApp group from its administrator, Nigel Mugamu. Consent was granted and I summarily joined the WhatsApp group on the 22nd of July 2018. I later exited from the group on 29 August 2018.

Mugamu is the founder of 263Chat which was created and launched on 29 September 2012. 263Chat was established as a way of encouraging participation in progressive national dialogue in Zimbabwe. 263Chat acknowledges that the use of the Internet and the numerous social media platforms available to Zimbabweans play an integral role in dialogue. Thus, 263Chat aims to amplify the Zimbabwean voices of those engaged in social, economic, and political deliberations (263Chat, 2019). The number 263 is the international dialling code for Zimbabwe and is a strong identifier for its citizens more so those in the diaspora as it creates a sense of nostalgia and community for them.

The 263Chat WhatsApp Group:

263Chat established its WhatsApp group in 2014 and had over 29000 subscribers in 2018. These subscribers engage in debates and dialogues, share pictures, videos, links to news stories, rumours, and jokes. Numbers with the dialling code +263 are largely popular, followed by South Africa's +27, UK's +44, and USA's +1.

The WhatsApp group facilitates open group chats which allow members to share and respond to messages sent out by the group administrator, as well as admin-only chats, which only circulate 263Chat articles and the daily e-paper. 263Chat started sending out weekly e-papers via WhatsApp in November 2017, and it launched a daily e-paper that compiles content into a single PDF, which condenses the news into a smaller file and cannot be easily shifted or edited. The e-paper is consistently around 19 pages in length and uses 2.7 MB of data, down from its

original 300 MB. 263Chat also has Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts. Mugamu stated that there was an increase in activity, analysis, and conversation on the 263Chat WhatsApp group during and after the coup against Mugabe in November 2017 (Thomas, 2019).

Previous research on the 263Chat Twitter account @263Chat establishes that it supports a variety of communicative practices with participants. @263Chat is a platform that allows other Twitter users such as individuals, politicians, brands, companies, and civil society groups to converge and have discussions with each other. Thus, the Twitter account encourages dialogue and participation which helps those Zimbabweans who are on Twitter to counter the effects of the governments' plethora of laws that severely limit freedom of speech, public debate, and criticism of the ZANU-PF regime (Ncube, 2016).

Ethnography:

Varis (2016) posits that ethnographic research on online practices and communications, and on offline practices shaped by digitalisation, has become increasingly popular in the recent years with the growing influence and presence of the internet in people's everyday lives. This notion of ethnography evolves from a myriad of concepts on the research approach such as digital ethnography (Murthy, 2008); virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000), cyberethnography (Robinson and Schulz, 2009), discourse-centred online ethnography (Androutsopoulos, 2008), Internet ethnography (Boyd, 2008; Sade-Beck, 2004), ethnography on the internet (Beaulieu, 2004), ethnography of virtual spaces (Burrel, 2009), ethnographic research on the internet (Garcia et al, 2009), internet-related ethnography (Postill and Pink, 2012) and netnography (Kozinets, 2010).

Ethnography allows a researcher to participate in people's daily lives overtly or covertly for an extended period. They watch what happens, listen to what is said, ask questions and collect any relevant data. Therefore, ethnography describes a culture and an understanding of a way of life from the point of view of participants (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Punch, 2013). The main characteristic of an ethnographical approach is that a group or case is studied in its natural setting.

In asking for permission to join the 263Chat WhatsApp group I apprised the administrator of my academic intentions and unreservedly agreed to anonymize all data obtained to be used for this study. I proceeded to then assume an ethnographic position and covertly participate or rather lurk in the group. In ethnography, participant observation is central data collection technique. It allows for the prolonged immersion in the life of a group, community, or organization to discern people's habits and thoughts as well as to decipher the social structure

that binds them together (Punch, 2013). I did not reveal my intentions to the group members and participants to circumvent modified and prejudiced findings which would render this research untenable.

Ethical Considerations for WhatsApp Research:

Activism today is increasingly facilitated by chat applications and there is a false perception of secrecy that encryption brings about in chat applications such as WhatsApp according to Barbosa and Milan (2019). With new technological affordances, new practices of civic engagement, and new forms of surveillance and risks there is requirement for a novel approach to digital research ethics. Therefore, ethical considerations must be the core prerequisite for engaging in digital ethnography. This will ensure respect for human subjects especially when they are vulnerable individuals as is often the case with political activists. Thus, Barbosa and Milan (2019) argue for a digital ethnography that requires up-to-date innovative ethical guidelines and suggest a two-pronged approach. The first tactic is to "rethink and update 'known' ways of doing ethics, undertaking at least three conceptual operations: going back to the basics, positing as central the notion of 'do not harm', which allows to re-centre the research subject at the heart of the research process; avoid reducing research ethics to a one-stop checklist, to privilege instead a recursive, iterative and dialogic process able to engage research subjects; moving past the consent form as the sole and mere regulatory moment of the researcher-research subject relationship" (Barbosa and Milan, 2019: 59).

The second approach intimates that while researchers think "through innovative ways of thinking ethics in chat app research, we ought to take infrastructure seriously, both the research site and the research ecosystem; embrace transparency and when the research question allows covert methods, avoid dishonest bypasses; and guarantee full anonymisation to research subjects to in order to future-proof findings and publications" (Barbosa and Milan, 2019: 59).

Melo et al (2019) argue that by using publicly available WhatsApp groups, data collection does not violate the WhatsApp terms of service. They also suggest that to ensure the privacy of WhatsApp group users, researchers must not share or disclose any Personally Identifiable Information (PII) such as cellphone numbers.

Thus, the data collection process used in this research complied with the WhatsApp privacy policies which are available on the official site https://www.whatsapp.com/legal/?l=en#terms-of-service. The privacy policy says that a user should be aware that their data is shared with other members of the group. Furthermore, all users in a WhatsApp group (public or not) can see the

profiles of other users as well as the messages posted in the group (see https://faq.whatsapp.com/). Therefore, it is possible to extract the messages from the group and send them by e-mail or share them with other users or groups (Caetano et al, 2018).

When the researcher joined the 263Chat WhatsApp group they fully committed and guaranteed the full anonymisation of the research subjects to the groups' administrator bearing in mind the affordances of the WhatsApp privacy policies.

Findings and Discussion:

The rise of Web 2.0 techniques in political practice has led to a rush to use social media to advocate for causes and when used properly, they introduce a relationship- building element into the equation and allow organizing online (McNutt, 2018). The chat application WhatsApp has since revolutionized the way people communicate and interact because it brings with it a new form of mobile communication – the group chats (Resende et al, 2019). These WhatsApp groups are great forums for collective discussions on a variety of topics especially events of great social mobilization, such as strikes and electoral deliberations. For interested people, WhatsApp group chats are very attractive as they facilitate information exchange.

Milan and Barbosa (2020) suggest that WhatsApp presents a new type of political activist which is emerging within and alongside contemporary movements – the 'WhatsApper'. This is an individual who uses the chat app intensely to serve their political agenda by leveraging its affordances for political participation. Thus, WhatsApp is now "more than a messaging app for hanging out with like-minded people and has come to constitute a key platform for digital activism in the Global South" (Milan and Barbosa, 2020: 1). Moreover, WhatsApp's "simplicity, reliability and accessibility are some of its core selling points, especially for people in the Global South where online services are accessed mainly through mobile phones and several connectivity and bandwidth issues are often thwarting a rapid and fluid digital experience (Treré, 2020: 3).

In Zimbabwe, the 263Chat WhatsApp group has numerous and diverse voices. These voices use the group for sharing texts, images, videos, and links to carry news, satire, and activism-related content. This gives credence to the notion that citizens in WhatsApp groups "contextualize and spur their political discussions by sharing links, pictures, videos, memes, or gifs that relate to politics or current events" (Gil de Zúñiga, 2019: 2). This content sometimes become viral because WhatsApp has a network configuration like other online social networks – Twitter and Facebook – which connects thousands of users (Resende et al, 2019). The

263Chat WhatsApp group like other Zimbabwean WhatsApp groups – Kukurigo Updates, Centre for Innovation and Technology (CITE) and Magamba Network – is also known for being a space where citizens discuss the possibility of organizing community engagement to protect elections (Dendere, 2019). However, this engagement does not always result in physical participation in rallies or protests because the state continues to respond with extreme ruthlessness against protesting citizens.

When the researcher was embedded as an ethnographer on the 263Chat WhatsApp group between 22 July 2018 and 29 August 2018, the dominant chats or discussions in the group were around the 2018 plebiscite. The conversations occurring in the group often mirrored those that were trending on Twitter and Facebook. Online conspiracy theorizing was prevalent in the group and Karekwaivanane (2019) argues that this is an integral element of the moral critique of the ZANU-PF government. Citizens also exposed the electoral irregularities of the country's voting system and shared the election results in real time. The 263Chat WhatsApp group was used to discuss politically contentious views and actions and it enabled a safe space for citizens to engage in these political chats and activism in the context of government censorship and surveillance of more open social media platforms. WhatsApp groups are thought of as safe spaces for political opinion expression and activism owing to that they secured by end-to-end encryption (Johns, 2020).

Having gone through several changes since its founding in 2009, WhatsApp has impacted political and civic engagement (Pang and Woo, 2020) and the deliberations on 263Chat confirm this. Participants in the 236Chat WhatsApp group demonstrate critical political awareness through the deliberations that take place in the forum. However, WhatsApp's scalability[21] and replicability[22] have made it relatively easy to disseminate content without links to its original context or sender. Thus, Pang and Woo (2020) find that WhatsApp is linked to the spreading of hoax messages and rumours that seriously impact rational deliberation and worsen social divide. In countries like India for instance, these hoax messages and rumours have been the cause of widespread panic and even mob killings (Goel et al, 2018). In response, WhatsApp introduced new limits on forwarding messages to stop the spread of fake news. The introduced new feature by WhatsApp limits how many times "frequently forwarded messages" can be sent

[21] 'Scalability: the potential visibility of content in networked publics is great,
[22] Replicability: content made from bits can be duplicated' (Pellegrino, 2018: 80).

on, as well as introducing new signage to denote these types of messages (Heathman, 2020).

Hoaxes and rumours are rapidly spread in the 263Chat WhatsApp group with other participants quick to identify them as such and warn others against sharing on other groups (family, church, etc). This is in line with the findings by Bowles et al (2020) that trusted civil society organizations can leverage WhatsApp's reach to successfully get individuals to reassess their misconceptions and correct related behaviour. Hence, Bowles et al argue that their findings "further highlight the similar role that other WhatsApp newspapers in the region might play (e.g., The Continent in South Africa and 263Chat in Zimbabwe)" (2020: 6).

The diverse dialog by Zimbabweans on 263Chat shows that the WhatsApp group has become a primary network for sharing and discussing news. Participants in the group frequently share political content through links to online news items, images of newspaper articles, or videos of television programs leading to immediate discussions on what has been shared. During the 2018 Zimbabwean elections what became apparent from the study of the group was that it enabled citizens to engage in vibrant political talk and discussion across political ideologies.

CHAPTER 9.

The Conclusion.

Introduction:

In this thesis, the first chapter presented a detailed background and context of the research by charting how the concept of social media is understood. Comprehensive descriptions of each of the three platforms explored in the thesis, Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp Messenger are also submitted. Each platform has been critical in establishing the influence digital media exert on society and culture. The second chapter highlighted and analysed Zimbabwe's political background which has shaped much of the electoral and media frameworks of the country. The third chapter presented an organized literature review which examined previous seminal works on the impact of social media on democracy. The works reviewed were especially relevant to the present study and as a starting point, the role of the internet in Africa is found to be crucial with respect to the continent's use of social media in matters of governance.

The fourth chapter submitted how the research in this thesis was conducted and detailed the research methods employed to ascertain valid and reliable findings. The use of digital methods an umbrella term for tool-based methods employed in the digital humanities and e-social sciences, was central to the research of the thesis. The technique enables the use of online data in the study of societal change and cultural condition by making use of available digital objects such as the like, share, and retweet buttons. The fifth chapter reasons that a political system that facilitates and encourages sincere and careful listening among its citizens will produce more democratic decisions. With an abundance of digital citizens due to the proliferation of the internet and social media, a democratic listening approach to deliberation is more than plausible. The sixth, seventh and eighth chapters discuss the findings made from the study of Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp Messenger, respectively and, this final chapter concludes the research of this thesis.

One of the elements of democracy and the rule of law is the freedom of expression. Politically, Imoh (2013) establishes that to democratize is to ensure free unhindered two-way communication between the government and the governed. Here, "the essence is to ensure the responsiveness of the government to the yearnings of the people and for the people to put their views across to government without fear or hindrance and in an atmosphere devoid of interference (Imoh, 2013: 42). However, the democratic experience of Africa is such that most Africans have lived under political systems where the genuine and

popular is circumvented. Nyamnjoh (1999) argues that democracy in Africa is confined to a few ambiguous statements in constitutions that are fashioned, often capriciously by civilian dictators or military regimes.

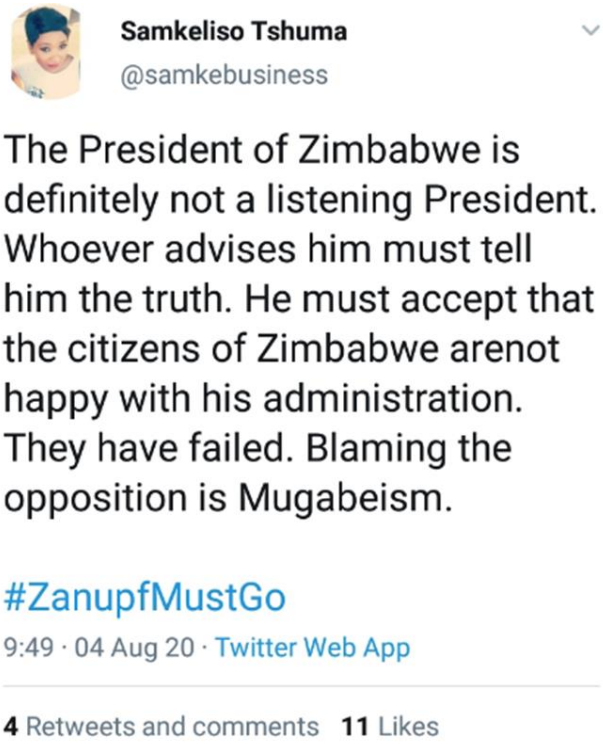
In recent years, scholars (Ott and Rosser, 2000) have found that the indirect effects of electronic communication have been most critical since the 1990s when democratic reforms were off to a slow start. Ott and Rosser (2000) argue that the easy access to international advocacy organizations and international media outlets due to the internet has been crucial for organizations in their maintenance of international pressure on regimes with questionable commitment to liberal ideals and democratization. “Human rights organizations in Africa, for example, have been quick to embrace the Internet as a means of thwarting government attempts to suppress information about rights violations, using their electronic link with large international human rights organizations to quickly publicize abuses and repressive practices” (Ott and Rosser, 2000: 139). Lately, Evans (2019) confirms that in Africa, the digital revolution has gathered momentum with average citizens increasingly and actively participating in online public discourses. Evans (2018) also adds that in established democracies such as the USA, the UK and Germany, the internet has become a force for increased democracy.

Nevertheless, the internet as a platform for active participation in public discourse has been increasingly challenged by many African Governments. These governments have responded to the ubiquity and pervasiveness of the internet by frequently imposing restrictions on social media and internet access particularly during elections. The governments impose these restrictions to “supposedly prevent hate speech and violent elements stoking unrest” (Evans, 2019: 170). This is often interpreted as an attempt by autocratic politicians to silence pro-democracy movements and to control the flow of information. Additionally, Cilliers (2016) points out that incumbent African regimes are adept at interfering in electoral processes by investing significant resources in ensuring favourable electoral outcomes. Through these actions the democratic space is constrained. This has seen a significant retreat in political rights, civil liberties, and the overall quality of democracy according to Mattes (2019). It is from these assertions that democracy is regressing in Africa that have prompted the investigation in this present study. This thesis uses the premise that the proliferation of the internet and the subsequent use of social media for political expediency has helped citizens in African countries like Zimbabwe pursue democratic standards. Historically, the ZANU-PF government has always rigged the electoral registration processes for their gain, run interference – bogged down opposition candidates in spurious legal cases and due to COVID-19 are barring

public gatherings. They misuse state resources to dispense patronage and always control "the diet of information (particularly through the abuse of public media in favour of the ruling party)" (Cilliers, 2016: 2). Thus, in this thesis I argue that social media has countered these undemocratic acts propagated by the Zimbabwean government. However, I also acknowledge that the use of social media for political activism is nonetheless still not enough to move Zimbabwe into a fully functional democracy. The social media activism of Zimbabweans still needs to be complemented by practical action for it to be substantial. Moreover, Zimbabwean citizens and politicians need to start democratically listening to each other.

Democratic listening as a remedy:

Fig.1.34.



In this thesis I advance that democratic listening on social media can be a panacea to the democratic deficit Zimbabwe is currently experiencing. After all, Scudder (2021) confirms that recent political theory in deliberative democracy places listening at the normative core of meaningful democratic deliberation.

Zimbabwe's Mnangagwa described himself as a listening president and said his government was committed to constitutionalism, the rule of law and judicial independence after he won the disputed 2018 plebiscite. The ZANU-PF and government mouthpiece, *The Herald*, predictably vaunted Mnangagwa's claim to be a listening president. *The Herald* went as far as stating that "Zimbabwe underwent Government transition ushering in the Second Republic which has

proved far removed from the era of former president Robert Gabriel Mugabe" (Mzila, 2018). However, these claims are premised on that Mnangagwa held several meetings with different demographics of the Zimbabwean population: the chiefs, captains of industry, students, women, and youths.

The notion of Mnangagwa as a listening president has been swiftly and definitively disproved because he Mnangagwa "pretends as if he is a listening President, yet in reality he is not" (Ndoro, 2020: 1). There has been few if any changes in Zimbabwe's political trajectory with a deepening economic crisis combined with a brutal crackdown on the government's domestic opponents resulting in disappointments all round. Melber and Southall (2021) posit that Mnangagwa's repressive response to mounting economic and political crisis and his failure to engage democratically with his own citizens, negates any prospect of re-engagement with the West – a critical partner in Zimbabwe's development.

Others like Chipere (2020) rightly view the democratic deficit in Zimbabwe as a crisis of political leadership in the country. Chipere (2020) goes on to argue that to restore stability to the country Zimbabweans must eliminate three main impediments. The first impediment is the most toxic one which is the current kleptocratic and dictatorial rule of Emmerson Mnangagwa and his ZANU-PF party. In the second impediment, Chipere (2020) surprisingly advocates for the removal of Nelson Chamisa, president of the MDC-A, the largest opposition party in Zimbabwe. The third impediment is even more shocking, Chipere (2020) says the World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) representatives in Zimbabwe must be removed. Chipere's (2020) argument is valid, but I have reservations Zimbabweans would support any action that results in the removal of Nelson Chamisa as leader of the opposition. Perhaps, what would ultimately make all three actions advanced by Chipere (2020) is the fact that Zimbabwean society remains a highly fractured society. "The country is splintered along political and religious lines: some support MDC, ZANU–PF or other parties, while other people are divided by the Pentecostal movements according to the charisma and level of flamboyance of the pastor" (Chipere, 2020: 320).

In this thesis, I thus argue that listening between citizens and politicians represents a vital theme in the processes of democracy. This is particularly crucial since we live in a time of increased political polarisation where "opportunities for open and meaningful communication between citizens with opposing views can be in short supply" (Hendriks et al, 2019: 138). The current democratic trends confirm this.

The current democratic trends:

"By the end of 2019, more people will have cast a vote than ever before. Nearly 2 billion voters in 50 countries around the world will have headed to the polls to elect their leaders. At the same time, data show that citizens' trust in governments is weak and political polarization is growing almost everywhere. Many are feeling left behind and find it hard to coexist with people who have different views. Social networks and echo chambers amplify this mistrust" (Brookings, 2019: 1). This is where global democracy finds itself currently. Although, concern has been growing for the past several years about the future of democracy, "public support for democratic ideals remains strong, and by one measure, global democracy is at or near a modern-day high" (Desilver, 2019: 1).

At the end of 2017, 96 out of 167 countries with populations of at least 500,000 were democracies of some kind, and only 21 were autocracies. Thus, Desilver (2019) asserts that the share of democracies among the world's governments has been on an upward trend since the mid-1970s. However, democracy in Africa according to Temin (2018) has seen a distinct regional divergence where the Southern and Western parts of Africa have significantly improved their democratic governance, with the Central and Eastern parts of Africa suffering major setbacks. Temin (2018) also identifies that there is a compelling correlation between population growth and democratic performance thus arguing that faster-growing countries have weaker ratings for democratic governance. Additionally, African countries that have weakened presidential term limits, authoritarianism is increasing at a rapid rate. Thus, Temin posits that "efforts by heads of state to hold on to power by changing or ignoring term and age limits are eroding democratic norms more broadly" (2018: 1). Any efforts by the civil society and the public to contest these power grabs have been met with intimidation, political violence, torture, and arrests.

Africa's democratic trajectory has also not been helped by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Global State of Democracy special brief of 2020 argues that the pandemic accelerated an ailing democracy in the world with more countries experiencing democratic erosion and deepening autocracy. In a bid to address the pandemic, more than half of the countries in the world declared national state of emergencies. This enabled them to take drastic but temporary and necessary measures to fight COVID-19. These measures have ranged from the curbing of basic civil liberties (freedom of assembly and movement) to postponing elections in some instances. Nevertheless, with the pandemic having deepened autocracies in most of the countries that were already non-democratic it has also "tapped into existing simmering citizen discontent and may have been the tipping point in

unleashing massive protest waves demanding democratic reform" (Global State of Democracy, 2020: 2). However, "African democrats face a growing, complicit and dangerous web of internal and external conditions and actors that aggressively seek to thwart their democratic aspirations in favour of authoritarian opportunism" (Fomunyoh, 2020: 1). Most of the incumbent African presidents have used the opportunity necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic to abuse emergency powers to limit freedoms of expression and assembly and further shrink political space.

In Zimbabwe, the United Nations Human Rights Office has already voiced concern over how Zimbabwe's government is using the COVID-19 pandemic as a pretext to clamp down on freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly and association. The Human Rights Watch (2021) also identified that the military and police forces in at least 18 countries physically assaulted journalists, bloggers, and protesters, including some who criticized government responses to COVID-19 such as insufficient healthcare funding, lockdowns, and a lack of masks and gloves for medical workers. Protests which have been against government responses to COVID-19 have been arbitrarily banned or broken up with social distancing concerns being cited in justification.

Therefore, analysts, civil society groups, and donors have been worried that the onset of the pandemic would drive a rise of authoritarianism in Africa. However, Kearns and Dizolele posit that "societal dynamics have certainly changed in many countries, but the evidence around the effects on democratic engagement is mixed" (2021: 1). Despite authoritarian governments using the pandemic to tighten control of the civic space and freedom of expression, the civil society and other democracy actors have adjusted accordingly and found other avenues to further their engagement. Hence, Kearns and Dizolele (2021) construe that COVID-19 has forced an acceleration and expansion of digital democracy. Hence, Beacon (2020) argues that the pandemic has presented a unique window of opportunity to innovate. The Covid-19 pandemic has led to an inevitable surge in the use of digital technologies due to the social distancing norms and nationwide lockdowns. As such, digital technology can be an extremely powerful tool for democratic action in the time of COVID-19. Buchholz et al (2020) advance that the COVID-19 crisis has since provided us with the opportunity to think deeply about what it means to be a good digital citizen who participates in civil and political life, critiques problems in the world, and ameliorates them through hopeful inquiry and action. The question then is how social media has influenced the democratization process in Africa.

What does social media add to the democratization processes in Africa?

Fig.1.35.

In 2011, protestors in Tunisia escalated calls for the restoration of the country's suspended constitution and in Egypt, strikes across the country brought daily life to a halt and toppled the government (Anderson, 2011). These protests that used social media to organize came to be known as the Arab Spring with Facebook and Twitter key to the uprisings. The Arab Spring has since shaped much of the discourse around the influence of social media on African democracy. Moghadam (2013) even argues that the year was a momentous one as it began with mass social protests for democratization and justice that eventually led to the collapse of longstanding authoritarian governments in Tunisia and Egypt. Recently, the government in Tunisia has responded with excessive force to social justice protests triggered by legitimate anger and frustration at the dire economic outlook. Tunisia is currently experiencing an economic crisis, worsened by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism-reliant North African country, that has deepened poverty and driven up inflation and unemployment. With social media once again used to organize the protests Parker (2021) says that at least 16 activists and bloggers have been arrested for posting on social media about the protests.

The anticipated impact of social media on Uganda's 2021 elections saw the country's communications regulator ordering all internet service providers to shut down social media and messaging applications, just two days before elections. Predictably, Uganda's Minister of Defense and Veteran affairs Adolf Mwesigye and his Internal Affairs Counterpart Gen Jeje Odongo announced that the government was working on how best they can manage social media which they claimed was being misused in the election (Bwire, 2021). "We are now having a challenge of citizen journalism. Social media propaganda is certainly not in the best interest of this country's security. We are looking for a way of dealing with it" said Mr Mwesigye on January 8.

The social media onslaught by Uganda's government ahead of the elections comes after Facebook confirmed that it had shut a slew of accounts belonging to Ugandan government officials accused of seeking to manipulate public debate ahead of elections. Facebook argued that these actions were necessary because the affected individuals and groups were using the platform to manipulate voters ahead of the elections (Kafeero, 2021). Kafeero (2021) adds that since the controversial 2016 general elections, Ugandans have harboured fears of internet related restrictions where the state restricts access to social media causing information blackouts. The Ugandan administration has also introduced a controversial social media tax. These restrictions and taxes have caused a spike in the use of VPNs in Uganda" to help circumvent these limitations.

Uganda is just one of the many African countries that are now resorting to shutting down the internet particularly during elections or protests. "Tanzania restricted access to the internet and social media applications during elections in October 2020. In June that year, Ethiopia imposed an internet shutdown which lasted for close to a month after unrest which followed the killing of a prominent Oromo singer and activist Hachalu Hundessa. Zimbabwe, Togo, Burundi, Chad, Mali and Guinea also restricted access to the internet or social media applications at some point in 2020" (Giles and Mwai, 2021: 1). The incessant internet shutdowns have necessitated calls for the recognition of the internet and social media platforms as necessary tools for democratization across Africa. MISA Zimbabwe (2021) argues that access to the internet and social media platforms is very critical during elections since it facilitates transparency around the processes and generally fosters active citizen participation. Moreover, "internet access equates to access to information and to the realisation of the right to freedom of expression" (MISA Zimbabwe, 2021: 1). Hence, the recognition of free and accessible internet thus plays an essential role in promoting free and fair elections.

The influence of social media on elections in Zimbabwe:

Zimbabwe's 2018 harmonised elections were "characterised by heavy usage of social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Facebook for purposes of campaigning" (Chibuwe, 2020: 8). This heavy usage thus provided an array of concrete and observable data which I have used in this present research to determine the impact of social media on Zimbabwean democracy. My findings are consistent with the view that the democratic foundations of our societies are under pressure from the influence that social media has on our political opinions and our behaviours. My overall conclusion is that because many Zimbabweans

are still excluded form internet access this makes social media have a limited impact on democratic processes in the country.

However, because of Zimbabwe's archaic media and freedom of expression laws, this thesis also advances that, Zimbabwean citizens now have a wide array of alternative information and modes of activism platforms. Thus, social media has provided an important avenue for Zimbabwean citizens to challenge politicians although "the ramifications for electoral politics are still emerging" (Mano, 2020: 61). Scrutiny, scepticism, and dissenting voices have found expression on Twitter in Zimbabwe, regardless of the threat of arrest by the Zimbabwean administration. Mnangagwa also uses his Twitter account to portray that his administration is of humble servant leadership which listens and fulfils the people's wishes on the economic front. To this end Mano (2020) asserts that Twitter has emerged as a space for mobilising resistance to authoritarianism and failed promises from elections.

Nevertheless, Mare and Matsilele (2020) advance that despite the digitization of electoral campaigns in Zimbabwe, traditional campaign strategies (rallies, songs, door-to-door canvassing, word of mouth and mass media) have endured. This is because in the rural and peri-urban contexts access to the internet is limited. Thus, "there is also a need for digital media literacy so that citizens can appreciate the power of the internet, content and the role of insidious political and economic actors that are behind certain websites and social media platforms" (Mare and Matsilele, 2020: 173).

Scholars (Highfield and Bruns, 2015; Essoungou, 2010) hail social media as a platform for democratic expression that is representative of new media technologies as ideal tools for modern democratic societies. Mateveke and Chikafa-Chipiro further add that "social media has opened up additional, if not alternative spaces for public deliberation by way of extension of the Habermasian public sphere and providing a multimedia platform for greater democratic participation, inclusion and expression" (2020: 9). Thus, it is not surprising that Zimbabwe's 2018 harmonised elections were "characterised by heavy usage of social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Facebook for purposes of campaigning" (Chibuwe, 2020: 8). This heavy usage thus provided an array of concrete and observable data which I have used in this present research to determine the impact of social media on Zimbabwean democracy. My findings are consistent with the view that the democratic foundations of our societies are under pressure from the influence that social media has on our political opinions and our behaviours. Consequently, my overall conclusion is that because many

Zimbabweans are still excluded form internet access this makes social media have a limited impact on democratic processes in the country.

Despite a myriad of challenges ranging from internet access, costs and social media use literacy, the use of these platforms in electoral processes in Africa has opened new democratic avenues for the continents' citizens. The digital age in Africa is also making the protesting of misrule become more visible in the continent. "Social media, which develops from existing and past technologies, has captivated African audiences and users, giving voice to many including youths, women, diasporas, rural voters, urban voters and others usually marginalised in electoral issues" (Mano and Ndlela, 2020: 2). Through a unique blend of audio and visuals social media is winning more people to politics as they can also closely monitor those seeking votes. Thus, social media has brought new agency, tactics, and strategies to the evolving relationship between politicians and citizens, especially in the Zimbabwe. The question this thesis has thus attempted to investigate has therefore been whether social media influences democracy.

Does social media influence democracy?

Olaniran and Williams (2020) argue that social media has been an equalizing force for disenfranchised individuals without a voice. However, they establish that "in some societies, social networks have evolved into a platform for fake news and propaganda, empowering disruptive voices, ideologies, and messages" (Olaniran and Williams, 2020: 1). Politically, the landscape has been transformed by social media use although the transformation has resulted in an increased rise of populism globally. Bond et al (2012) add that online political mobilization messages distributed and shared through personal social media such as Twitter, Facebook or WhatsApp have led to self-guided information seeking and self-serving behaviour. The present study understands and confirms these views while asserting that for a country like Zimbabwe, social media has remained beneficial in the pursuit of democratization.

Does social media influence democracy in Zimbabwe?

Social media in Zimbabwe have influenced democracy but are yet to completely bring the desired change many are looking for. The COVID-19 pandemic has also deepened ZANU-PF's authoritarianism to shocking but not surprising levels. Chigumadzi succinctly captures this by saying "in some countries, the tightening of restrictions in response to a rise in cases might be welcomed or at least tolerated. In Zimbabwe, they are deeply worrying. Since emergency regulations were imposed in March, the ruling ZANU-PF has used COVID-19 as convenient cover to loot funds, clamp down on press freedoms, violate human rights, and

arrest activists. Perhaps most worryingly, it has used the lockdown period to quietly amend the constitution to consolidate executive powers without input from citizens" (2020: 1). In the same year (2020) Access Now reported, #KeepItOn – a global network of human rights organizations that work to end internet shutdowns – received worrying reports that the Zimbabwean government wanted to shut down the internet to stifle anti-government protests planned to take place on Friday 31 July 2020.

Nevertheless, the use of social media by Zimbabwean citizens reveals that the platforms (Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp) is indubitably influencing democratic values in Zimbabwe. "Unable to protest on the streets, some in Zimbabwe are calling themselves "keyboard warriors" as they take to graffiti and social media to pressure a government that promised reform but is now accused of gross human rights abuses" (Mutsaka, 2020: 1). Although, Zimbabweans are angry they are still afraid to take to the streets because of the heavy handedness of Mnangagwa in dealing with dissent and protests. This has led to some analysts saying online protests might not be enough to move Mnangagwa. However, in turning to social media Zimbabweans are accessing information about government faster and cheaper leading to increased calls for them to act. The activism of online campaigns has helped place Zimbabwe's political crisis and human rights abuses on the global map as Zimbabweans realize that social media has a massive international influence.

Does social media influence democracy in the rest of Africa?

Fig.1.36.

The rest of Africa much like Zimbabwe has embraced the power of social media for democratic activism purposes. Recently, in Nigeria a video of a fatal police shooting of a Nigerian man, sparked outrage and reignited a public call for the total dissolution of the controversial police unit in the country. "The video caused large numbers of Nigerians including celebrities, politicians, and activists calling for justice using hashtags such as #WarOnSars, #EndSars, and #SarsAlert #SARSMUSTEND" (Olasupo, 2020: 1). The protest was largely organized on social

media and gained traction because citizens shared their experiences of police abuses and videos of brutal incidents. Unlike protests in Zimbabwe, Nigerians moved their campaign from social media to the streets of Nigeria.

In Tanzania, the government banned the organising or supporting of any form of demonstrations online and ordered citizens not to share information about the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country. The Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority then issued a statement asking members of the public who received or saw a text or WhatsApp group or any other online source that incited and misinformed about COVID-19 to report to the authorities. This prompted MISA Zimbabwe (2020) to argue that the regulations moved Tanzania further away from the agreed democratic principles and tenets of freedom of expression.

In Lesotho, the government through the Lesotho Communications Authority (LCA) proposed new regulations that stipulated that, individuals with more than 100 followers on social media platforms should be considered as internet broadcasters and thus may need to register with authorities (MISA Zimbabwe, 2020). Lesotho, like Tanzania is seeking to regulate online content creators and MISA Zimbabwe is concerned that these proposed regulations by the LCA are designed to police and regulate free speech online. Thus, MISA Zimbabwe posits that Lesotho should be cognisant of the "African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms which stipulates, among others: Everyone has the right to use the Internet and digital technologies in relation to freedom of assembly and association, including through social networks and platforms" (2020: 1).

Does social media influence democracy in the rest the world?

Recently, Myanmar's military seized power in the Southeast Asian country in a coup and detained the country's civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi and numerous other top government figures (Yeung, 2021). The military moved to disrupt the internet and news services as they sought to secure their grip on power. Access to Facebook which is by far the largest online platform in the country was cut. Griffiths and Regan (2021) argue that in cutting Facebook the military intended to affect the ability of people to get information or organize any response via social media. Myanmar further expanded its internet crackdown by ordering the blocking of Twitter and Instagram days after the coup (Iyengar, 2021). These actions undermined public conversation and the rights of Myanmar' people to make their voices heard.

In Thailand, Facebook came under scrutiny and pressure after blocking a group with 1 million members. Facebook blocked the group which was critical of the Thai monarchy after being pressured by the government (Tanakasempipat, 2020). In

its defence, Facebook said they were planning a legal challenge to the government's demand that it blocks the group. Members of the group argued that their group was part of a democratisation process and a space for freedom of expression. They accused Facebook of cooperating with an authoritarian regime to obstruct democracy and cultivating authoritarianism in Thailand (Tanakasempipat, 2020).

The Gulf News (2021) reports that in Russia, state-controlled media outlets co-exist with online platforms that are popular among the opposition. Thus, authorities scale up efforts to contain and sometimes even try to replace sites that they view to be a threat. After the arrest of Alexei Anatolievich Navalny – a Russian opposition leader, lawyer, and anti-corruption activist – his team used YouTube to publish a two-hour investigation into a lavish palace on the Black Sea allegedly belonging to Russian President Vladimir Putin. The video has been viewed more than 60 million times on YouTube since its publication. YouTube is the primary source of news for many young Russians (Gulf News, 2021). This has prompted Russian authorities to start tightening the 'Runet' – Russian segment of the Internet – in the name of fighting extremism, terrorism and protecting minors.

Such is the impact of social media on the rest of the world that it sends countries scurrying to limit its effects and minimise the exposure of their undemocratic practices.

Hashtag Activism in Africa:

Fig. 1.37.

Sebeelo (2021) advances that the African political landscape has become a site of contest where new digital technologies, especially social media, have significantly made inroads into an arena that was traditionally the preserve for traditional media. As such, "various social media-based activisms have emerged across Africa to address issues ranging from corrupt political leaders, feminist issues, access to education and other related social issues" (Sebeelo, 2021: 100). Therefore, these digital technologies – social media – have thus provided Africans with new ways of participating in political spaces. Research (Ofori-Parku and Moscato, 2018) suggests that citizens across the African continent have realised that activist activities conducted online from protests to fundraising are increasingly necessary and complementary to offline efforts.

The youth in Africa have been the biggest beneficiary of the proliferation of social media activism. Oduah confirms this by saying "social media campaigns have helped to mobilize Africa's youth to challenge authority and draw attention to forgotten causes" (2020: 1). Africa is teeming with young people who want revolutionary change in their countries, and they see social media as a step towards that change. In 2020, hashtags fuelled campaigns in Namibia, Zimbabwe, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and in Nigeria with Oduah (2020) asserting that the African youth ran these campaigns to great effect. Therefore,

Africans have indubitably merged digital technology, social media, and ingenuity to fight for change using one of the world's most potent devices – the hashtag.

2020 saw the use of several hashtags to solicit support and raise awareness to social issues that affected the general populations of various African countries. These hashtags (see table below) dominated African social media spaces in 2020.

Table 1.3.

Country	Hashtag
Angola	#VidasAngolanasImportam
Cameroon	#AnglophoneCrisis
Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)	#CongolsBleeding
Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana	#ChildTrafficking
Ethiopia	#AmharaGenocide
Liberia	#RapeNationalEmergency
Namibia	#ShutItAllDown
Nigeria	#EndSARS
South Africa	#AmINext
Zimbabwe	#ZimbabweanLivesMatter

#VidasAngolanasImportam in Angola:

Citizens across different African countries have been using social media to speak out against all of forms of injustice. Social media platforms – particularly Twitter (using hashtags) – have helped amplify these messages. Angolans fed up with police brutality started #VidasAngolaNasImportam (Angolan Lives Matter) in support of the protesting of police brutality, bad governance, hight cost of living and unemployment in the country (Olojugba, 2020: 1). Urban Angolan youths staged demonstrations of clusters of several hundred protesters in multiple cities against entrenched state corruption, massive unemployment, rising costs of living, and loss of political freedoms. EXX Africa (2020) also reported that the protests were heavy-handedly and violently repressed by security forces.

#AnglophoneCrisis in Cameroon:

Ndongmo (2021) asserts that internet users in Cameroon face many challenges especially when it comes to accessing civic space, and particularly the digital civic space due to months-long internet shutdowns. Despite a low level of Twitter use, hashtag campaigns have been used to express discontent about the political and economic situation in Cameroon, and to garner international attention (Nganji

and Cockburn, 2020). This method was used successfully in 2017 with the #BringBackOurInternet hashtag. Currently, “Cameroon is divided into majority francophone (French-speaking) and minority anglophone (English-speaking) regions. Many anglophone Cameroonians feel side-lined by the francophone regime, which has led to protests and even separatist movements in recent years” (Ndongmo, 2021: 231). Hence, Cameroon’s anglophone crisis is a conflict drawn by language. Around 80 percent of the country speaks French; the rest speaks English. O'Grady (2019) writes that the violence spurred by this linguistic split has brought Cameroon to the brink of civil war. “The government claims armed English-speaking separatists who want to create a new nation called Ambazonia have terrorized civilians and attacked government forces, prompting the military to retaliate against them” (O'Grady, 2019: 1).

DW (2020) reports that the crisis in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon started in 2016 when lawyers and teachers took to the streets of Buea and Bamenda to protest the domination of French in Anglophone courts and schools. The strike action quickly gained public sympathy and a popular uprising dubbed "the coffin revolution" took place in Bamenda demanding political reforms. The International Crisis Group (2017) have reported that the government has since taken several measures to address these concerns by creating a National Commission for Bilingualism and Multiculturalism. They have created a new bench for Common Law at the Supreme Court and new departments at the National School of Administration and Magistracy. They have recruited Anglophone magistrates and 1,000 bilingual teachers and finally turned the internet back on after a 92-day cut.

#CongoIsBleeding in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC):

In the DRC there has been a silent holocaust happening which has prompted the hashtag #CongoIsBleeding. Sanches writes that “millions of people are being killed due to resources that the western world is benefiting from, such as coltan” (2020: 1). Congo has the world’s largest reserve of coltan which is a critical mineral needed for electronic devices, aerospace, and the innovation of technology. Many Congolese women are being raped with equally many children being exploited to work in the coal mines. Sanches (2020) argues that although many organisations like the United Nations (UN) and the International Criminal Court (ICC) have intervened, their interventions have not been effective.

#ChildTrafficking in Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana:

The International Labour Organization (ILO) has since 2001 reported about the rise in the trafficking of children in West and Central Africa. The ILO’s 2001 report

stated that some cases of trafficking of children within West Africa were for commercial sexual exploitation. However, there has been a steady increase of trafficking children for other forms of work such as domestic work, work in plantations, small trade, begging and soliciting. Currently, Aljazeera (2020) reports that the use of child labour has risen in cocoa farms in Ghana and Ivory Coast during the last decade. The estimated number of children currently working in cocoa production in the two countries is 1.56 million.

#AmharaGenocide in Ethiopia:

Gagliardone and Brhane (2021) advance that Ethiopia has some of the lowest levels of internet penetration in the world yet applies some of the severest measures for surveilling and censoring online communication. The Ethiopian government has developed and sharpened their computational propaganda tools because of the threats posed by the rising discontent which has led to widespread protests in the Oromia and Amhara regions. The Ethiopian regime recognises the role social media plays in fuelling and coordinating these protests. Therefore, internet shutdowns have become a recurring element since 2016, affecting specific regions where protests emerge. Sometimes these shutdowns extend to the whole country when the protests become more generalised.

The Moresh Wogene Amhara Organisation (2015) writes that after the demise of the military government in Ethiopia in 1991, there was a great hope for democracy to take root in the country. Instead, ethnic politics was introduced which tore the social fabric of ethnic relations in the country, created competition for resources and caused distrust amongst its more than 85 ethnic groups who have coexisted for centuries long. Furthermore, the country witnessed an ethnic cleansing and genocide committed by the government and its allies mainly against the Amaras, the second populous ethnic group in Ethiopia. The Amaras have been targeted as enemies who are wrongly accused of being rulers, oppressors, and exploiters.

#RapeNationalEmergency in Liberia:

In Liberia, rape, and gender-based violence have been a growing issue since the 14-year long war back in 1989. During the COVID-19 pandemic rape against women and children increased by 50% (Sanches, 2020). This prompted the President of Liberia, George Weah, to declared a #RapeNationalEmergency to allow his government to implement anti-rape measures. “President Weah responded to citizen pressure to address the increasing violence against women” (Rodriguez, 2020: 1). Anti-rape campaigners staged a three-day protest in the city of Monrovia calling for Weah to respond to a petition to declare rape a national emergency.

#ShutItAllDown in Namibia:

Throughout October 2020, Namibia saw large protests across numerous cities as young women marched against gender-based violence under the hashtag #ShutItAllDown. Following the murder of Shannon Wasserfall, Namibians created #ShutItAllDOwn to protest femicide, rape, and gender-based violence and to demanded political action from the government. Mainly young Namibian women took to the streets of Namibia's capital, Windhoek in protest. Violent police responses only fuelled the outrage and led to continued public protests across several regions and towns (Melber, 2020). Namibia remains a patriarchal society where toxic masculinity is anchored in paternalistic and patronising value systems of male supremacy exacerbated by the effects of colonisation. However, Melber (2020) highlights that a growing number of younger men emancipate from such legacy as reliable partners, caring husbands, and fathers. Some of these men have even also been participating in the #ShutItAllDown protests.

CIVICUS (2020) states that the difference between #ShutItAllDown and previous protests is the fact that the young people of Namibia are becoming increasingly involved in political affairs. Namibia has a young population with tremendous digital abilities. Young Namibians have become vocal about holding government and other institutions accountable to their mandate and fulfilling their work and obligations towards the citizenry. "Additionally, the movement was able to grow more organically because social media are increasingly being used as a tool to have exchanges and push for accountability" (CIVICUS, 2020: 1).

#EndSARS in Nigeria:

Oladapo and Ojebode (2021) posit that Nigeria has witnessed a high level of adoption of digital devices and technologies in the past twenty years. As such, the adoption of these new technologies has brought transformations to different aspects of life at the individual, group, and societal levels. Nigerians across age, sex, and literacy level use social media for different purposes and the use of social media for civic action is popular in the country. #OccupyNigeria in 2012 is the first nationwide online protest which was mobilised significantly online which led to the shutdown of state capitals. Since then, online protests have become common in Nigeria.

Nigeria's Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) was created and put in place to protect civilians. Instead, they have murdered, harassed, and raped citizens (Sanches, 2020). Again, young people in Nigeria mobilised through social media and begun staging demonstrations calling for the abolition of the federal SARS, which had long been accused of unlawful arrests, torture, and extrajudicial

killings. Aljazeera (2020) reported that the protests were sparked by a viral video showing SARS officers killing a young man in the southern Delta state. Authorities denied the video was real and the man who filmed the video was arrested, provoking even more anger.

Agbalajobi (2020) argues that the protest was not just about SARS, but a result of pent-up anger over the dehumanising policies of government, maladministration, injustice, hunger as well as high energy and fuel prices. Hence, the refusal by protesters to end their action. For Agbalajobi (2020) the use of social media made the protest unique due to the way it helped mobilise protesters. Therefore, by social media Agbalajobi (2020) argues that Nigerians are writing a new social contract that creates a new understanding of how leaders and public servants should relate to citizens. Additionally, the youth are reinventing governance in Nigeria and bringing about a new culture of asserting rights among the citizenry all through activism on social media.

#AmINext in South Africa:

Bosch and Roberts advance that "South Africa has experienced growing digital citizenship, facilitated using social media applications such as Facebook and Twitter to create new online civic spaces to advocate for change" (2021: 134). It is South Africa's youth who have been increasingly using social networking sites to develop what Bosch (2017) argues is a new biography of citizenship. This activism can be best understood through the three influential hashtag campaigns of 2015 – #RhodesMustFall, #FeesMust Fall, and #ZumaMustFall. Bosch (2016) argues that the use of Twitter hashtags alerts users to offline protest gatherings and calls them to action as #AmINext shows.

South Africa is said to be one of the most violent places in the world for women and girls (Sicetsha, 2019). In an extensive 2018 report on violence in the country, Statistics SA noted that the rates of femicide in the country were more than five times the global average. After the murder of 19-year-old Uyinene Mrwetyana at a post office in Cape Town, South African women took to social media to ask #AmINext "a question that seemed plausible because such acts of violence happen all too often in South Africa" (Masemola, 2019: 1). Gender-based and sexualized violence have since gained new focus in South Africa in recent years.

Mbude (2019) argues the #AmINext hashtag reveals the fear and anxiety SA women must live with. The viral hashtag ignited a conversation led by South African women on how they had been violated. Most of them reported being shut down by their families and officials when they wanted to report these incidents of violence. Lischka (2019) posits that the hashtag #AmINext is not without

controversy. It was first used in 2013 in the wake of the shooting of Trayvon Martin in the USA, before being adopted to protest the high murder and disappearance rates of indigenous women in Canada. The hashtag's use in Canada was simultaneously criticised for moving the focus from actual victims to potential victims.

#ZimbabweanLivesMatter:

The last two decades has seen a rapid adoption of mobile and internet technologies in Zimbabwe and this "has empowered citizens but also expanded the repressive capacity of the state" (Karekwaivanane and Msonza, 2021: 44). In Zimbabwe's context, the citizens have been making use of digital technologies to open civic space and express their digital rights. However, Karekwaivanane and Msonza (2021) argue that significant challenges persist as the state implements policies, laws, and bans that hamper achieving internet freedom and the full enjoyment of digital rights. Zimbabwe which has been facing a perpetual economic crisis has seen the government crackdown on dissenting voices about the current conditions. Innocent citizens are being tortured and women are raped by soldiers and the police prompting #ZimbabweanLivesMatter which has demanded justice and reform (Sanches, 2020).

In 2016, #ThisFlag sparked a democratic movement in Zimbabwe spoke out against Mugabe's government. However, #ThisFlag fizzled out because it did not take the online conversation and build it offline (Mkandhla, 2020). The current campaign has drawn attention to human rights abuses in Zimbabwe and has attracted international celebrities and politicians which has put pressure on Mnangagwa and his government to act. However, Mnangagwa's response has been lackadaisical, in a televised speech he blamed 'dark forces' within and outside the country for undermining Zimbabwe's economic recovery (Ndlovu, 2020). Nevertheless, the hashtag #ZimbabweanLivesMatter (and #ZanuPFMustGo) are helping bring injustices in Zimbabwe to the fore on social media. Karekwaivanane and Msonza (2021) also establish that #ZimbabweanLivesMatter has kept open the civic space and hopes of democratic reform. Despite this, Mkandhla, (2020) argues that the 6.6% social media penetration in Zimbabwe means that many Zimbabweans are still left outside of the discussion.

Nevertheless, by using social media as referenced above, citizen activists across Africa confirm the assertion by Mossberger et al (2017) that digital citizenship emphasizes the empowering capacity of the Internet for the exercise of political, economic, and social rights and opportunities. The present research

acknowledges that for digital citizenship to firmly take root in Africa, "it requires regular and effective Internet access and the skills to use the technology" (Mossberger et al, 2008: 1). For Zimbabwean citizens, digital citizenship has included more than political participation by presenting an economic opportunity and access to public goods. Hence, their online activities have expanded the capabilities needed for economic opportunity and most importantly democratic participation. However, African governments are increasingly taxing internet access where they mostly target social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp prompting Bergere (2020) to argue that they are regulating citizenship. In this regulation of citizenship, the democratic rights of citizens are restricted, and this is unjust. Unjust because "citizenship is an all-encompassing concept that allows for the framing of issues around the ideologies of social justice, equal rights, and participation" (Oyedemi, 2015: 452).

The challenge of social media in Africa – fake news, misinformation, and disinformation:

Chenzi (2020) argues that the emergence of social media platforms has ended the monopoly of journalism as the sole purveyor of news and blurred the lines between what is authentic and what is fake. Digital social media is affordable, readily accessible, and speedily disseminated yet it enables the rampant spread of fake news. Wasserman asserts that a working definition of fake news is that it is news that is "either wholly false or containing deliberately misleading elements incorporated within its content" (2020: 4). This fake news is made possible by the increased accessibility of the means of online media production and distribution.

"The fact that social media such as Facebook and Twitter have provided platforms, where these stories can spread very quickly and widely, seems to have exacerbated the concerns about the impact of fake news on democratic debate" (Wasserman, 2020: 4). Ncube (2019) argues that politics have since been altered by fake news, propaganda, misinformation, and hoaxes and most significantly political communications as voters are increasingly relying on social media for news and information about politics. Thus, the spread of false stories particularly during the 2016 USA presidential elections has given rise to renewed concerns about fake news and how they may influence political debate and public discourse.

In South Africa, Wasserman (2020) has identified the use of social media platforms like Twitter as tools that spread political misinformation. Although, fake news has been harmful for South African democratic debate and journalistic values Wasserman argues that "its emergence has also provided an opportunity for the

mainstream journalistic community to re-assert their dominance and re-affirm the professional paradigm of news" (2020: 13). On the hand, Chenzi reasons that "there is sufficient evidence to suggest that social media platforms are gradually becoming catalysts in spreading fake news reports which usually escalates the xenophobia situation within and outside South Africa" (2020: 2).

Since, misinformation campaigns are being used to influence political agendas, governments are responding by restricting online spaces and embarking on other countermeasures (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales, 2019). Hence, to highlight the concerns posed by the fake news, some African governments like Egypt, Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania introduced anti-fake news laws in 2018. These laws grant these governments the power to pull down and block any social media account that is considered to publish fake news. This has allowed some countries like Egypt "to extend control over any voices that are critical of the government rather than control fake news" (Mutsvairo and Bebawi, 2019: 144).

Recently, Ahinkorah et al (2020) have argued that misinformation related to the COVID-19 pandemic is gradually gaining much popularity and amplifying the threat facing humanity about the continuous spread of the virus. In Africa, "several people are currently spreading a wide range of diverse misinformation through the internet, opinion leaders, political figures, and social commentators through unsubstantiated malicious information or fake news" (Ahinkorah et al, 2020: 1). Therefore, the understanding of the various forms of misinformation about COVID-19 is essential for various governments, public health officials, and the media so that they design effective information campaigns.

Facebook challenge in Africa:

The influence of Facebook in Africa is expansive and foreign actors use it to influence events across various countries in the continent. In 2020, Facebook through its Head of Security Policy, Nathaniel Gleicher, announced that it had taken down three separate networks that it had discovered for coordinated inauthentic behaviour that targeted communities across the continent. Facebook claimed that they removed the groups for violating their policy against foreign or government interference (Gleicher and Agranovich, 2020). The networks in question originated from France and Russia and they targeted multiple countries in North Africa and the Middle East.

From the activity that originated from France, Facebook removed 84 Facebook accounts, 6 Pages, 9 Groups and 14 Instagram accounts. This activity targeted primarily the Central African Republic and Mali, and to a lesser extent Niger, Burkina Faso, Algeria, Cote d'Ivoire, and Chad. Gleicher and Agranovich state that

fake accounts were used in this activity to post about "news and current events including France's policies in Francophone Africa, the security situation in various African countries, claims of potential Russian interference in the election in the Central African Republic (CAR), supportive commentary about French military, and criticism of Russia's involvement in CAR" (2020: 1).

From the activity that originated from Russia, Facebook removed 61 Facebook accounts, 29 Pages, 7 Groups and 1 Instagram account. The activity in this network focused primarily on the Central African Republic (CAR), and to a lesser extent on Madagascar, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Mozambique, South Africa, and the CAR diaspora in France. Gleicher and Agranovich state that fake accounts were used in this activity to post about "news and current events, including COVID-19 and the Russian vaccine against the virus, the upcoming election in CAR, terrorism, Russia's presence in Sub-Saharan Africa, supportive commentary about the CAR government, criticism of the French foreign policy and a fictitious coup d'état in Equatorial Guinea" (2020: 1).

Such is the influence of Facebook in the African continent and everywhere else that Cadwalladr argues that the platform is out of control because "this is a company that facilitated an attack on a US election by a foreign power, that live-streamed a massacre then broadcast it to millions around the world and helped incite a genocide" (2020: 1).

Twitter challenge in Africa:

Arnaudo (2017) posits that the growth of the internet is changing political discourse throughout the world. Simultaneously, the computational systems and the networks that connect them are playing an integral role in shaping elections and debates. In Africa, Lubinga and Baloyi (2019) contend that Twitter users in Africa are five times more likely to use the platform to voice their political views than those in the USA and the UK. Hence, Ndlela argues that social media is now an indispensable element in elections across Africa thus "algorithms and bots now play an increasing role in the movement of election news, both 'real' and fake, and adverts aimed at influencing voters" (2020: 32). Dahir (2018) adds that bots are increasingly influencing election cycles in Africa by disrupting conversations and distorting facts. However, the growing force of bots in African politics is mimicking trends that are already taking place globally.

The Russians have featured prominently in accusations of spreading misinformation by using disinformation campaigns. Some of the recent examples are "the allegations that Russian trolls used social media to sway the American, French and German. Another example is alleged Russian interference and the

spreading of propaganda to influence the Brexit referendum and swaying decisions on complex topics such as vaccination and anti-science topics such as climate change, and stem-cell research" (Featherstone, 2019: 1). In 2019 and 2020 bots and trolls created global discord by sharing misinformation on 5G technology, vaccinations, Covid-19, Bill Gates, and the 2020 US elections (Kubheka, 2020).

In using bots, one can "amplify a specific conversation on social media outlets like Twitter and Facebook by posting videos, photos, and biased statements targeting particular hashtags and wordings" (Dahir, 2018: 1). What is also alarming is that bots can convey emotions that are comparable to those conveyed by human accounts. Pastor et al (2020) assert this strategy is used by bots so they remain unveiled and, thus, attract humans that are encouraged to interact with the posted automatic-generated content. In 2018, BusinessTech also presented on three types of bad actors that drive discussions of propaganda – Bots, sock puppets, and trolls. Superlinear (2018) described bots as automated accounts that are controlled by computers, algorithms, and rules. They tend to be used to boost the content of other accounts controlled by real people. Sock puppets are accounts controlled by real people pretending to be something they are not to advance an agenda. Trolls are real people that post content to get a rise out of other users. Bigots, racists, misogynists, and generally disagreeable users also fall into this category.

The ubiquity of bots is such that "any time you log on to Twitter and look at a popular post, you're likely to find bot accounts liking or commenting on it" (Woolley, 2020: 1). Woolley (2020) states that posts by bots are sometimes about selling junk or spreading digital viruses but the bots that post misleading hatred in response to news articles or official statements, are all entirely political.

WhatsApp Messenger challenge in Africa:

WhatsApp has become so pervasive and immersed in people's everyday lives that many more are now able to easily communicate with a larger number of contacts than ever before. In most African countries, Cheeseman et al (2020) contend that WhatsApp is the default mode of telecommunication especially in urban areas. But the platform overestimated its importance when it announced that "WhatsApp users who do not accept its updated terms and conditions by the 15 May deadline will be unable to receive or send messages until they do so" (Kleinman, 2021: 1). There was backlash among many users with rival applications such as Telegram and Signal seeing a huge surge in demand. Following this,

WhatsApp has since delayed the initial rollout and now changed the way it notifies users of changes (Kleinman, 2021).

In the African context, Pindayi (2017) argues that WhatsApp enables users to share information that results in political views being crystalized by allowing people to share information on a platform that is not easily monitored by governments. Individuals now conduct sales and advertise their products through the platform. WhatsApp has also empowered teachers and students to share academic information because it is relatively cheap to use the platform. Finally, Pindayi asserts that "WhatsApp has affected the media landscape by becoming an alternative source of news and boosting the reach of citizen journalists" (2017: 42).

The political influence of WhatsApp has expanded rapidly in line with its growing penetration. Thus, Cheeseman et al argue that WhatsApp "has become part of the fabric of election campaigns and is now a key mechanism through which political leaders seek to communicate with their campaign teams and supporters" (2020: 1). Electorally, in Uganda ahead of the 2021 elections, Natabaalo et al (2021) found that almost all candidates running for parliament created a handful of WhatsApp groups to support their campaign efforts. In Nigeria, Hitchen et al (2019) find that in the political use of WhatsApp, the platform was used to both spread disinformation and to counter it. WhatsApp, they argue also levels the playing field between a ruling party and the opposition and thus can be used to boost electoral transparency and accountability. In Kenya, Omanga (2019) advances that WhatsApp and WhatsApp groups have become an important venue for political deliberation. The combined attributes of immediacy, flexibility, and extremely low data charges for WhatsApp have made WhatsApp groups popular spaces for participation in Kenya's political life.

The increased use of WhatsApp has brought its own challenges with a growing concern about the potential for the platform to undermine democracy in several countries across the world. In politics, Oxford Analytica (2019) and Cheeseman et al (2020) find growing evidence that WhatsApp is used more to de-campaign rivals than to share information about an individual's personal qualities and manifesto. In Kenya and Nigeria, WhatsApp has in recent elections been used to spread false stories about election violence to undermine voter turnout in certain areas to aggravate political and ethnic tensions.

Summary of the key findings:

The present research set out to investigate the influence of social media on Africa's democracy and the impact has been substantial, but the results are mixed. Zimbabwe and its 2018 harmonized elections were used as a case study to

ascertain how social media has stimulated democratization processes across the continent. Much of the challenges Zimbabwe faces – social, economic, and political – mirror the enduring political disputes found across Africa. Since the land distribution programme in the 1990s Zimbabwe has experienced a protracted crisis commonly referred to as the 'Zimbabwean Crisis' in popular discourse. Mhiripiri and Ureke (2018) argue that the crisis is in fact an amalgamation of several crises, the political, economic, social, and cultural. It is this Zimbabwean crisis that has shaped much of the current democratic challenge in the country. Presently, "with security forces having seized control of economic and financial policy at a time of shrinking GDP and skyrocketing inflation, Zimbabwe is facing its worst crisis in more than a decade" (Smith, 2020: 1). Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, basic goods are scarce, and the country faces food, fuel, and medical equipment shortages due to a lack of hard currency to purchase imports.

Zimbabwe is now among the four most food insecure countries in the world alongside Yemen, Somalia, and South Sudan. This situation will only worsen, and Smith (2020) argues this will create fertile ground for political instability and civil unrest. It already has. Mnangagwa's administration has responded by using the coronavirus pandemic to clamp down on fundamental freedoms – freedom of assembly and freedom of expression. Predictably, activists, journalists, and members of the opposition (MDC-A) have been the only ones affected. The police have also banned a corruption protest and threatened to deal with the participants as terrorists (Chidombwe, 2020). The regime in Zimbabwe has thus reactivated its authoritarian systems to crush dissenting voices.

Activists, journalists, and members of the opposition have not taken these acts of suppression without a challenge. Unable to protest in the streets, they have taken to social media to confront the rising dictatorship. One can argue that with Mugabe infamously staying of social media and the current president, Mnangagwa, embracing the platforms, Zimbabweans have been emboldened to use social media for activism. Thus, oppression has since gone online as the government increasingly terrorizes social media activists. Muronzi asserts that "in the face of an increasingly autocratic government, Zimbabweans have turned to social media to vent their anger and shine a light on human rights abuses and misrule" (2020: 1). In creating sustained online campaigns against the ZANU-PF government, citizens have since made #ZimbabweanLivesMatter successful as international attention was drawn to Zimbabwe's democratic deficits. Currently, "Zimbabweans are using social media platforms to express outrage at the 'lawfare' waged by their government against dissenting voices" (Moyo, 2021: 1). Thus, social media in Zimbabwe have come to enhance participative democracy where they

have opened new avenues for civic participation in political processes, inspiring hopes for a democratic reinvigoration. Yet, ZANU-PF only views social media as platfomrs that are "used to instigate violent protests, to issue subversive statements and to spread fake news, causing fear and despondency amongst citizens" (Mugari, 2020: 1).

Changes in Zimbabwe's electoral landscape:

Historically, Mpofu (2015) asserts that ZANU-PF has always been unsympathetic and intolerant when dealing with dissenting voices. Today, the Zimbabwean regime has shifted this oppression to social media. This is because social media in Zimbabwe has become a leading space for political deliberation and activism against the government's undemocratic inclinations. The use of Twitter in Zimbabwe also shows that it has provided a veritable site of political campaigns and contributes to the spread of fake news and cyber-propaganda (Mare and Matsilele, 2020). No wonder the Zimbabwean president, Mnangagwa, encourages his supporters to use social media to disrupt online debates and frustrate criticism against himself and his government (Mwareya, 2019).

With Zimbabwe's elections largely contested and ZANU-PF engaging in vote-buying and coercion, citizens now actively participate in election campaigns and monitoring processes to avert vote-rigging. Ahead of Zimbabwe's 2018 elections, citizens exposed irregularities in the country's voting system using Facebook and Twitter. The Twitter use around the 2018 harmonised elections also introduced the fierce cyber battles between the varakashi and nerrorists. From the ensuing battles between these two fanatical groups Chibuwe concluded that Twitter "became more of an insults sphere than a public sphere characterised by critical rational engagement between netizens" (2020: 16).

The use of Facebook for political deliberations in Zimbabwe was popularised by the emergence of Baba Jukwa ahead of the 2013 elections. Baba Jukwa became a counter hegemonic space for the circulation of public opinion, and this expanded the space for democratic political participation on the platform (Mutetwa, 2015; Matingwina, 2018). Since then, political parties and candidates have appropriated the platform to organise internal and external activities. Zimbabwe's political candidates engaged with young voters on social media to solicit their vote and on Facebook Mututwa et al (2019) advance that they generated enticing images on their pages as they communicated with voters in real time. On the other hand, Bosch et al (2020) argue that the posts and nature of engagement on Mnangagwa's official Facebook page indicates new forms of political

communication in the public sphere, which are accompanied by an implicit promise for more deliberative discourse.

In exploring the use of WhatsApp by Zimbabweans in relation to the 2018 elections, the key finding is that dialogues on the 263Chat WhatsApp group often mirrored those that were trending on Twitter and Facebook. Additionally, WhatsApp extended the reach of those political deliberations that occurred only on Twitter and Facebook to the older population that was not on the sites. Since WhatsApp is secured by end-to-end encryption (Johns, 2020), the political opinion expression on 263Chat was diverse and vibrant across political ideologies. The group also appeared to be a primary network for sharing and discussing all news, Zimbabwean and otherwise.

The limitations of this research:

Every study has limitations, and they exist due to constraints on research design or methodology. In most instances, these factors may impact the findings of a study. Some limitations can be evident to researchers before the start of a study, while others could become clear when conducting the research. In chapter 4, the limitations and weaknesses of social media research were presented. The most important detail was that if ethical practices are not considered in research about the internet and social media, the veracity of the study is impinged. As such, researchers have a duty to uphold ethical standards and principles when conducting such research. This study observed all key considerations and was granted ethical clearance by the Ethics Committee of the Centre for Film and Media Studies (CFMS).

In this study, one of the first identified limitations was that research on social media and its influence on democracy has been done constantly on every country in the continent. In the case of Zimbabwe, which was used as a case study, research on the country's adoption of social media and use in politics has also been done repeatedly. This makes it difficult to uncover new facts that have not been discovered already by other scholars.

Having used research tools like Netvizz and Twitonomy to gather data off Facebook and Twitter respectively, the researcher was presented with an enormous cache of data. The research had too much data to analyse yet too little time to do so. Facebook posts had thousands of comments and it was just not feasible to analyse and use every single comment. As such, in the selection of which comments to use there was noted conflicts arising from cultural bias and other personal issues. For example, some comments in written shorthand were ignored in favour of comments written in complete and full English sentences.

Another limitation was the ignoring of some comments written in Zimbabwe's Shona language as the researcher is not fluent in the reading and interpreting of the language. However, for most of the used comments in the study that were written in Shona, the services of an interpreter were used.

Looking towards the future:

"When social media platforms were first created in the late 1990s and early 2000s, their creators and supporters promised a democratic revolution" (Engler, 2019: 1). Lately, the perspectives on social media and their impact on democracy are growing more negative. Hence, the research on this thesis like Netanel contends that "social media both underwrite a golden age of free speech and threaten to undermine democracy. Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and other social media bring unprecedented opportunities for individuals to organize political movements and to communicate to a global audience. But in so doing, social media serve as platforms for hate speech, disinformation, terrorist recruiting, incitement to violence, excessive information insularity, psychological manipulation, and uses of automated bots to distort public discourse" (2021: 1).

Despite this, the present research maintains that in a country like Zimbabwe social media has been good for democracy so far. With a closed media environment, one TV station and polarised print media social media has in Zimbabwe created a space where people analyse what happens in the government and give criticism. Human rights in the country continue also to decline with the Human Rights Watch Report of 2021 stating that in 2020 more 70 government critics were, abducted and tortured. Furthermore, the states' security apparatus also commits arbitrary arrests, violent assaults, abductions, torture and other abuses against opposition politicians, dissidents, and activists. The use of social media by these affected groups has helped bring most of these injustices to attention as Zimbabwe has insufferable laws that muzzle the media and put stringent requirements on access to information.

All Zimbabweans have the responsibility of speaking out against the excesses of the ZANU-PF government. With space for peaceful protests constricted hashtag activism is the future for now but, it will only work if it eventually translates to offline actions.

#ZimbabweanLivesMatter

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