

## Searching for elusive journalism values in the era of fake news: A qualitative study on the experiences of a blogging community in Zimbabwe

### ABSTRACT

A group of Zimbabwean bloggers formed a voluntary association (the Zimbabwe Online Content Creators-ZOCC) aimed at protecting the credibility of their online content against fake news by producing factual content. Like the media elsewhere in the world, Zimbabwean media have been influenced by the phenomenon of “post-truth”, a term relating to the rise of an era in which emotions rather than facts seem to sway public opinion, and where populism overshadows basic principles of reason and veracity. Qualitative interviews with members of this Association sought to understand the value of membership of this group in reducing the circulation of disinformation and misleading content. Firstly, results show that to some extent the Association inculcated a sense of identity and belonging which bind members’ commitment to the group’s core values such as being balanced, independent, truthful, accurate and responsible. Mainstream media organisations, bloggers, vloggers and animators can use the power of their professional identity to coalesce as a buffer against fake news. However, this study noted that as the group is voluntary-based, it lacks authority and disciplinary power to enforce compliance with group norms, thereby running the risk that some members can violate the same values with impunity. Secondly, in Zimbabwe, there are strong relationships between the type of falsified and misleading news and the socio-political and economic context. Information might be published for its “feel good” effect (at the expense of its credibility and accuracy) in a context where democracy and economic prosperity are illusory to many.

### INTRODUCTION

This article examines how an emerging community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger 1998, 2000) consisting of the Association of Zimbabwe Online Content Creators (ZOCC) came together voluntarily to establish a professional identity guided by ethical and responsible reporting in the face of a global proliferation of fake news. A detailed description of the problematic notion of fake news follows in the next section, but in more general terms, the term is used in this article to refer to misleading and falsified information disguised as factual news (see Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Corner, 2017; Persily, 2017). Zimbabwe Online Content Creators are a voluntary membership-based grouping of individuals who create content online and are driven by an

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ambitious desire to eliminate the creation and distribution of falsified news among members. This association of online content creators started off in 2016 with a membership of over 50 bloggers, vloggers, animators, and satirists.<sup>1</sup> While the group is fairly small and was only formed in 2016, it has gained visibility on a number of fora involving civil society, and organised training workshops for Zimbabwean journalists in various competencies such as election coverage (particularly the 2018 harmonised elections) and basic journalism principles, as well as self-organised workshops such as one on how to commercially exploit the online space. Observing this group as an instance of Lave and Wenger's (1991) community of practice, drawn together by a common identity and practice, this study seeks to investigate if, and how, the notion of "community of practice" may have conceptual and practical relevance for a group such as the Zimbabwe Online Content Creators. In addition, the study also sought to understand how Zimbabwe's political context may be influencing the configuration of fake news in the country's public spheres. More specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: How does belonging to a community of practice such the ZOCC shape the group's attitude towards fake news? What potential do agreed oversight mechanisms of the ZOCC have for curbing fake news among members? What is the relationship between Zimbabwe's political context and the fake news predominant in Zimbabwe's public sphere?

## **1. ZIMBABWE ONLINE CONTENT CREATORS AND GLOBAL EFFORTS TO ELIMINATE FAKE NEWS**

The Zimbabwe Online Content Creators is a voluntary membership-based grouping of individuals who create content online (bloggers, vloggers, animators, satirists and entrepreneurs) drawn together by a shared ethos of ethical journalism that emphasises credible, accurate, factual and balanced content. As was later revealed during data collection, these online content creators objected to being identified as "professional journalists", preferring rather to call themselves "entrepreneurs" who see the online platform as an opportunity for business, and therefore are concerned that getting associated with fake news could dampen their entrepreneurial interests. Interestingly, it emerged during interviews that this Association agreed on two particularly interesting oversight mechanisms for ensuring that members refrain from spreading fake news. The first mechanism, as it appeared during interviews, was an agreed set of professional ethical principles such as accuracy, truthfulness, responsibility and balance as a way to enhance the credibility of their work. The code of ethics created by the Zimbabwe Online Content Creators is not substantially different from its predecessor crafted by mainstream mass media in Zimbabwe and administered by the Voluntary Media Council of Zimbabwe (VMCZ). For example, as in the mainstream legacy media, the code of ethics for online content creators recognises balance, objectivity, truthfulness, accuracy and independence as seals of credibility on their work. The second mechanism is what they call a "peer review system" – implying an oversight system where members flag the work of fellow associates to avoid the violation of the agreed ethics.

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<sup>1</sup> The ZOCC membership list can be accessed at:  
[https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/18PbVTZFCZ\\_fscE4O0bPiY6lNgc5hxSw\\_0vhSCs4uPcM/edit?fbclid=IwAR3UEhaNx2GL8qGnn\\_uBWlw2LsIlZ5QcmDxpUJlh6unS1S\\_kibYKvQ6bLvo#gid=613012930](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/18PbVTZFCZ_fscE4O0bPiY6lNgc5hxSw_0vhSCs4uPcM/edit?fbclid=IwAR3UEhaNx2GL8qGnn_uBWlw2LsIlZ5QcmDxpUJlh6unS1S_kibYKvQ6bLvo#gid=613012930)

The agreement also stipulates that satirists would label their websites clearly as satirical, while opinion pieces would be clearly labeled as such. During individual discussions with members of the groups, group members insisted that these were core values that bind this group together.

Commonly used in academia, peer review involves subjecting information to scrutiny through a network of academic colleagues to judge the standard and quality of the work, and verify facts, accuracy and overall conformity to established canons of academic publishing in a particular field (Kelly, Sadeghieh & Adeli, 2014; Solomon, 2007). In this way, members of the community of academics provide necessary critique and oversight over the quality of colleagues' work against the benchmarks of scientific rigour, among other considerations. Arguably, subjecting one's work to scrutiny by own peers (as agreed to by the Association under study) presupposes that members of the community of practice will be obliged to conform to the canons of the trade including, for this study, journalism's canons of truth, objectivity, impartiality, fairness and responsibility. But how adequate and watertight are such measures to enforce compliance with ethical journalism in such a loose coalition of independent online content creators, most of whom are driven by the profit motive? Some evidence from the West also shows that the profit motive – something implicit in the present group's declared entrepreneurial motive – has been the biggest driver of fake news as online news sites compete for audience following (see Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). More so, some contemporary evidence shows that even the most respectable mainstream news stables in the United States of America, for example, were complicit in a furore of disinformation during that country's 2016 general election (see Jankowski, 2018; Farkas & Jannick, 2018; Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Whether the stipulation that satirists should label their websites clearly to indicate that their work is satirical content, and that opinion pieces on members' websites should be clearly labelled as such is adequate to deter fake news is subject to this article's enquiry.

Using the strength of this group, the Association occasionally holds seminars and outsources training for its members in many facets of online publishing, including how to attract audiences online professionally as well as how to transform online platforms into sustainable entrepreneurial spaces. In the just ended 2018 Zimbabwe harmonised elections, members participated in various seminars and workshops involving ethical election reporting. Overall, the Association holds the view that attracting audiences online as well as transforming their online platforms into sustainable entrepreneurial spaces can only be undergirded by professional journalistic conduct where truth, objectivity, balance and fairness are adhered to. Such ambitious collaborative efforts by online content creators in Zimbabwe represents another of many initiatives across the globe involving attempts at fact-checking and eliminating misleading material. Examples of initiatives to curb fake news elsewhere include, for example, developments in the United States of America, where media groups such as *The Washington Post*, *The Economist* and *Trinity Mirror* have come together and agreed on a range of disclosure principles which include sharing information about who funds their news outlets, how corrections for misleading information are made and whether articles are news, opinion or sponsored content (Kuchler, 2017).

In January 2019, WhatsApp started limiting all its members to forwarding any single message up to five times in an effort to tackle the spread of false information on the platform. However, an

obvious loophole is that there is nothing to stop those on the receiving end from each forwarding the same message up to five times themselves. In addition, the use of end-to-end encryption by WhatsApp means its messages can only be read by their senders and recipients, limiting the firm's ability to spot false reports. In January 2019, Facebook announced that it had removed 500 pages and accounts allegedly involved in peddling fake news in Central Europe, the Ukraine and other Eastern European nations. Facebook now works with fact-checkers in more than 20 countries. Another example is the announcement in 2017 by Facebook that it would be outsourcing fact-checking services through established organisations like Snopes, Factcheck.org, ABC News, AP, and Politifact, while also relying on platform users to flag suspiciously fake news stories to trigger the fact-checking process (Persily, 2017). In the same year, Google also announced intentions to revise its advertising network (AdSense), which would see it barring fake news sites from financial gain through Google-placed adverts on their sites (Persily, 2017). In Kenya, PesaCheck is the first African fact-checking initiative, supported by the International Budget Partnership and Code for Africa affiliates to verify often confusing numbers quoted by public figures in East Africa (pesacheck.org). In South Africa, Africa Check is a non-partisan and nonprofit organisation started in June 2012 that exists to promote accuracy and honesty in public debate and the media in Africa (africacheck.org). In Zimbabwe, Zimfact was launched in March 2018, as an independent, non-partisan Zimbabwean online fact checking platform and was created under the Voluntary Media Council of Zimbabwe (<http://www.zimfact.org>). These are all efforts made at institutional levels involving parties who are not journalists, and have particular interest in contributing to the elimination of falsified news disguised as factual news. While the sincerity and efficacy of such initiatives are genuine in principle, in reality they may be inadequate given that fake news increasingly continues to be a global problem.

For this study, a focus on this emerging community of online content creators in Zimbabwe poses two unique opportunities in an era of global fluxes in journalism and communication in general. Firstly, the Association of online content creators constitutes a segment of the growing worldwide efforts aimed at curbing the spread of fake news as stated above – a segment which is unique in that it uses the combination of both a peer oversight mechanism and a professional code of ethics. Secondly, this Association seems to offer novel ways of combating fake news through the agency of online content creators themselves, using methods that pre-empt government intervention/regulation and its threat to human rights and freedom of expression. But how effective might this approach be and what lessons can be extrapolated to other settings where this approach might already be in use? The study interrogates this emerging community of practice, with a view to understanding how it can contribute to overall efforts aimed at making online news more credible.

## **2. UNDERSTANDING “FAKE NEWS” AND “POST TRUTH”**

The term “fake news” assumed global prominence during the 2016 United States of America general elections (Jankowski, 2018; Farkas & Jannick, 2018). Allcott and Gentzkow define fake news as “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers” (2017: 213). Elsewhere, fake news is also defined as fabricated stories that have no factual basis but are presented as news (News Media Association, 2017). While major media outlets such as

*The New York Times*, *CNN*, and *Buzzfeed News* have used the term fake news to designate misleading information spread online. President Donald Trump has used the term as a negative designation of mainstream traditional media such as newspapers and television that tended to report negatively about him or did not agree with his political ideologies during his campaign (Farkas & Jannick, 2018). Widely adopted and discussed terminologies within the research on fake news make distinctions between disinformation and misinformation (Farkas & Jannick, 2018). Some scholars refer to “misinformation” as all types of unintentionally misleading information and “disinformation” as only the intentional production and circulation of such information (Farkas & Jannick, 2018; Karlova & Fisher, 2013; Keshavarz, 2014; Tudjman & Mikelic, 2003). Using such conceptualisation, disinformation could thus mean deliberately creating false news in order to sway public opinion while misinformation implies unknowingly spreading or sharing such information on social media. Broadly, dominant literature on fake news concerns itself with the distinction between “truthful” and “false” information (Farkas & Jannick, 2018). However, for this study, fake news is used to denote deliberate disinformation that is a result of purely fabricated, misleading, and verifiably inaccurate information spread online by online content creators such as bloggers. However, it should not be construed to imply that fake news and disinformation in Zimbabwe – or indeed elsewhere – only takes place exclusively online. A number of scholars have questioned the credibility of some established global news outlets (Jankowski, 2018; Farkas & Jannick, 2018).

It is perhaps through the usage of the term “fake news” by Donald Trump during the 2016 United States of America to denounce news accounts that conflicted with his own publicity that the term shares some close affinity to the term “post-truth” (Corner, 2017). Hopkin and Rosamond define post-truth as “the rejection of basic principles of reason and veracity” (2007:1), while Farkas and Jannick describe post truth as neglect of truth, scientific knowledge, and evidence in contemporary political discourses (2018). In its more original sense, the concept of “post-truth” can be traced back to Ralph Keyes’ (2004) broader social critique of dishonesty and deception. More recently, the term has been applied to politics, where it is now variously used to mean a mistrust of authoritative “experts” (Drezner, 2016) or, according to the Economist (2016), a brazen willingness to lie and the straightforward refusal to accept clearly documented facts (Hopkin and Rosamond, 2017:1). Like fake news, post-truth is also symbolic of a shift from an era where truth and rationality used to be sacrosanct, to an era where emotion rides roughshod over truth and rationality. For this study, these concepts are useful in locating the dynamics of fake news and the motivations surrounding the creation and circulation of fake news. In Zimbabwe, information might be selected for its “feel good” effect in a context where democracy and economic prosperity are illusory for the common person.

As the era of post-truth politics increasingly gains a foothold in contemporary times, the media seems to also play fast and loose with facts, often presenting news in ways that defy the traditional canons of truth and objectivity. Because of the absence of authoritative oversight and fact-checking on online information, and because the internet allows people to create content and attract their own audiences, online content creators and citizen journalists have naturally been blamed for damping the credibility of news journalism. The different perspectives on “fake

news,” “post-truth politics” and “post-factuality” all seek to address the question of what can be labelled as valid, proper or “true information” online and offline, and what should be counted as “fake news” or disinformation (Farkas & Jannick, 2018). Generally, these debates have all been amplified in the era of online publication and the rise of citizen journalism. As most of the online content creators in this study fall outside the purview of the institutionalised editorial structure characteristic of the traditional press, they generally fall under the rubric of citizen journalists. In the next section, the study takes a brief detour to discuss the relationship between citizen journalism and mainstream media.

### **3. CONTEXTUALISING ZIMBABWEAN MEDIA AND CITIZEN JOURNALISM**

In broad terms, citizen journalism is news content produced by people who are not formally trained as journalists. Terms such as “non-professional”, “amateur journalists” and “eye witness accounts” (Banda, 2010, Steenveld & Strelitz, 2010; Goode, 2009; Rosen, 1999) have often been used in literature describing citizen journalists. Particular emphasis is laid on their limited purview of professional training. On the other hand, mainstream journalists like to refer to themselves as “professionals” because of their induction into journalism through formal training in the canons of the profession through accredited institutions of learning.

In Zimbabwe, the growth of citizen journalism is strongly tied to a political context characterised by restrictive media laws, receding economic fortunes threatening the viability of mainstream media business, as well as a context where the Zimbabwean publics are polarised along party political lines (Chuma, 2013; Mano, 2005; Ranger, 2004; Rønning & Kupe, 2000). Most of the restrictive media laws were promulgated in the early 2000s at the time when a plethora of economic and political crises took a peak in the country, and during which the former President Robert Mugabe attempted to “manage” bad publicity by controlling the media (Moyo, 2009). In such an environment, mainstream media – and particularly the private press – have been easy government targets through various forms of legal censures. However, in a context where the profession of journalism has been battered by a prolonged economic meltdown and continued political interference, quality journalism bound by ethical responsibility diminishes (Chuma, 2013). It is in such a media environment that new communications technologies such as mobile phones, the internet, and satellite broadcasting have become powerful tools for political mobilisation, advocacy, and citizen participation in the national political discourse (Moyo, 2009).

As is the case elsewhere across the world, in Zimbabwe, the rise of citizen journalism and use of social media was catapulted by the simultaneous decline in public trust and confidence that the mainstream mass media will report the news fully, accurately and fairly. This has, to a large extent, spurred the popularity of social media and citizen journalism (Banda, 2010), resulting in social media creating its own “parallel market” of information (Moyo, 2009) largely alternative to the extremely polarised press in the country (Mpfu, 2015). In Zimbabwe, the mainstream public media continue to be typically used by political elites for political manoeuvring, repositioning and consolidation of power in the more than two decades-long “crisis” (Chari, 2010) besetting the country. As such, ordinary Zimbabweans have adopted social media as localised spaces for

either venting their anger or coping with their everyday struggles (Mpofu, 2015; Moyo, 2009). This is because the private media occupies an extreme end of polarity where it has been accused of playing to the tune of opposition party politics. Supporting this, Chuma argues that the public press's cozy relationship with the ruling party represents the "patriotic" journalistic regime (2013) which does public relations for the state, whilst the other "oppositional" journalistic regime consist of the private press and its support for opposition politics.

In such a context, digital media technologies continue to offer citizens a means to create content and speak directly to their own audiences. In substantial ways, citizen journalism has radically changed communicative space by offering alternatives to the news that was previously censored by the dominant state owned and private press (Mpofu, 2015, Tsarwe, 2014; Banda, 2010), and is sometimes accused of dabbling in disinformation and fake news. However, in traditional legacy media, journalists have well-established systematic fact-based methods of verifying news for accuracy and facts through institutionalised editorial gate-keeping structures (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991). Although not always successful (as the mainstream media continue to be patronised by different centres of power such as politics and business), these editorial structures are supplemented by a set of professional ethical principles and standards that are guidelines for, at least normatively, responsible, balanced, fair and accurate journalism (see Shoemaker and Reese 1991). In contrast to this is online news, which allows content to be relayed among users with no significant third party filtering, fact-checking, or editorial oversight (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

After more than two decades of celebratory literature, evidence on the ground seems to show that just like the mainstream media, digital media have not been an entirely trustworthy source of credible information. As a tool for democratisation and development, social media have attracted somewhat equal measures of both optimism and scepticism.

#### **4. COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE AND SOCIAL IDENTITY**

This study draws on the notion of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2000) and social identity (Hogg, 2016; Jenkins, 2014; Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) as explorative lenses to understand how members of the Association of online content creators came together through a shared vision of eliminating – or at least reducing - disinformation and misleading information on their websites. According to Wenger and Lave (1991), a "community of practice" provides a context in which individuals develop values, norms, relationships and identities appropriate to that community through participatory learning with others (Smith, Hayes, & Shea, 2017; Wenger, 2010). They are, in other terms, "a simple social system" (Wenger, 2010:179) in which peers who have a better grasp or mastery of the domain may become a source for the individual's understanding through conversation (Smith et al., 2017). In the context of this study, junior bloggers who are members of the Association benefit from the expertise and rich experiences possessed by more senior bloggers. Communities of practice consist of what are called apprentices (those individuals new to a certain community of practice) and masters (experienced community of practice members with socially acknowledged higher levels

of expertise). Through learning with others, apprentices become co-opted masters of the work. Lave and Wenger (1991:42) acknowledge that communities of practice are never uniform as they are never defined precisely and that they can also be informal loose coalitions. For them, it is essentially about how newcomers are socialised into a rather static practice community, through legitimate peripheral participation (as apprentices) before becoming full members with mastery of the work that bring communities of practice together. Specifically important of this study is the central message that communities of practice form to generate solutions to novel problems (Smith et al., 2017; Wenger, 2010; Brown & Duguid, 1991). This formulation is important for this study as it mirrors what the Association of online content creators aims to achieve by coming together and developing an internal mechanism (which they call a “peer review” system) for monitoring members’ adherence to prescribed standards of professional ethics and improved factual reporting. For a community to qualify as a community of practice, it must fulfill two essential elements. These elements are a shared experience over time, and a commitment to shared understanding (Wenger, 2010; Lave & Wenger, 1991). For this study, the members of the blogging community who came together have a shared experience of blogging over a period of time in Zimbabwe, and are brought together by a commitment to preventing the creation or relaying of fake news on their platforms.

However, a community of practice is central to the identity construction of many of its participants (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 1999), and this identity is strengthened by feelings of belonging and commitment to shared values (Jenkins, 2014). Therefore, the notion of community of practice shares similar aspects to those of the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In more general terms, identity is concerned with how people categorise themselves and others as in-groups and out-groups (Jenkins, 2014; Hogg & Reid, 2006). Originally formulated by Tajfel and Turner (1986), social identity theory holds that individuals’ social behaviour is a joint function of (1) their affiliation to a particular group identity that is salient at that moment in the interaction, and (2) their interpretation of the relationship of one’s in-group to salient out-groups. Tajfel and Turner (1986) argue that the primary process by which a positive social identity is established is through comparison with other groups. Specifically important for this study are debates in literature on identity in which there is disagreement on whether identity is connected to action (Smith et al., 2017; Jenkins, 2014). That is, does identity influence actions? Communities of practice do not only produce shared learning, but rather they also produce a shared identity where members acquire new knowledge, a sense of who they are, their identities and, importantly, change their attitudes (Smith et al., 2017). One of the central questions raised in this study is whether identifying with this Association potentially inculcates a desire by members to assume a new identity built around a belief that credible and factual news is sacrosanct.

One criticism that can be made of the notion of community of practice, however, is its assumption that learning and participating with others in a group produces a positive identity wherein members develop mutual understanding of each other. In reality, and as the group under study here will show, there are a number of internal inconsistencies and contradictions that might work to subvert the overall objectives and goals on which the basis of the group rests, and such contradictions might work to discourage the development of strong and positive identity with the group. In



addition, their premises on informal, loose coalitions and their ephemeral nature (Lave & Wenger, 1991: 21) might work against internal coherence.

If positive identity is achieved by comparison with others, how plausible is the claim that belonging to a group of online content creators and identifying with the group's stated norms and code of ethics would influence members to strive to become ethical online content creators? If communities of practice involve group learning, where members use one another as sounding boards, how accurately do these concepts describe the Association of online content creators studied here?

## **5. METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION**

This study primarily uses a qualitative research design. Qualitative research usually involves in-depth investigation of a small number of cases – sometimes just a single case study – rather than trying to represent general trends (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). As Stake (2005) argues, the purpose is to represent not the world but the case: a bounded and integrated system with identifiable patterns of behaviour such as the emerging community of online content creators under study here. As stated above, over 50 online content creators originally signed up to become group members at inception in 2016. At the time of this study, 20 interviews with members of the Zimbabwe Association of Content Creators were conducted between May 2017 and October 2017 in Harare, Zimbabwe. Thirteen interviewees were male and seven were female (these included ordinary members of the group consisting of ordinary bloggers, online satirists, vloggers and animators as well as the group's President and the General Secretary). On launching its activities, the Association used popular social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to publicise its work, attracting the attention of many followers, including this researcher. As a result of this publicity and its involvement in a number of journalism-related fora, the Association has gained a foothold and recognition within the Zimbabwean media fraternity. Further contacts for interviewees were also obtained from a list displayed on the Association's Membership Form circulated on the Association's official Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/ZimOnlineContentCreators/>). This form also invites more online content creators to join the Association. Initial access to interviewees was relatively easy as the Association's membership form openly lists names and contacts of existing members, including the contacts for the President and the Secretary General. In addition, the Secretary General of the Association gave an inaugural public speech during 2016 World Press Freedom Day celebrations at a local journalism training college, making initial access to the group relatively easy. The Association's President and Secretary General suggested contacts for other members of the Association who were active in the group's activities. Through these individuals, further contacts were provided, creating a snowballing effect. In qualitative research, snowballing is useful if founded on personal recommendations by initial contacts among closely knit groups. Emphasis was on members who were active in the group's activities, and had a shared symbolic connection of being a community joined together by a practice of creating different forms of online content (bloggers, vloggers, satirists, etc.), allowing the researcher to engage with "naturally occurring groups of like-minded people" (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996:82). Also, it was important to select members who were willing to provide the desired information and had something to say about the Association. Members interviewed were between 25 and

40 years of age. In conducting the interviews, the researcher followed an interview guide with a list of questions revolving around the research's key questions as highlighted above. The topics included more general questions on what the Association is about and what it sought to achieve as a group. Most questions centred on what aspects of this group are perceived as valuable in achieving the group's overall objectives, how strongly members identify with the group and its set objectives, as well as their perception of the value of allowing peers to flag their online content. Other questions centred on whether interviewees think that such a self-regulating group with a set of journalism ethics has any value in efforts towards fighting against fake news. In addition, some questions focused on whether members see correlations between Zimbabwe's political environment and the fake news witnessed in the country's public sphere. Discussions were open-ended, allowing members to give as much detail as possible, while the interviewer moderated the discussions to ensure that they do not cascade outside of the purview of the study research questions. The interview guide served the purpose of directing and focusing discussions to relevant topics regarding the activities of the Association. As put by Schroder and others, the interview guide was "like the agenda" (2003:156).

Interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed. Transcribed data was coded and themes emerging from the interviews were identified for further analysis. As the data was recorded verbatim, the researcher's role was that of analysing these and uncovering meaningful and coherent accounts of the members' experiences and perception of the Association, picking out the most salient themes (Ruddock, 2001). Thus thematic coding was used as the mode of analysis. Jensen explains this method as an inductive categorisation of the interview transcripts into concepts, headings or themes (Jensen, 1988). This is a complex process that involves comparing and contrasting the different elements of meaning. For transcripts used in this article, some interview participants' names are real, while pseudo-names were used in cases where interviewees chose to remain anonymous.

## **6. FINDINGS**

### ***6.1 Belonging to the group and the sense of responsibility***

One of the research questions sought to understand whether belonging to a community of practice such the Zimbabwe Association of Online Content Creators would shape members attitude towards fake news. Generally, an assumption underpinning this study was that a stronger sense of belonging to this Association would generate a greater likelihood that members would be compelled to abide by the group's ethical norms; and this, in practice, would translate into members avoiding the creation and circulation of fake news on their online platforms. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), the more one identifies strongly with a group, the more one is likely to think with a positive bias to that group, and the more likely one is to behave within the norms of that group. During interviews, individual members expressed the view that belonging to this group compelled them to rally towards a shared goal centered on eliminating fake news on their platforms. An interviewee argued:

So far the group and the code brings some sense of responsibility, and more importantly, a sense of belonging. You do not want to be part of such a noble group like ours but you are the only guy who does not abide by the laws of that group or abide to the same ethics with others (Interview with Tau, October 2017, Harare).

Tendai, an emerging blogger stated that:

The fact that I belong to this group, as well as the fact that we are such a small group makes it easy for your fellow friends to notice when you do unethical things. We are a small group, we know each other, and we are all in the blogging industry (Interview with Tendai, July 2017, Harare).

To a large extent, as evident in the transcripts above, the code of conduct and the peer review system act as unifying ideals that inculcate a semblance of shared identity and commitment to the groups' objectives. As a starting point, the recognition of the undesirable nature of fake news and the commitment to be bound by common values work as significant rallying points for efforts towards curbing fake news. Individual members expressed the view that belonging to this group was a motivation for upholding responsible behaviour among associates.

The study also made use of Wengers' (1998) concept of "community of practice" to understand if and whether group identity might strongly influence members to work towards curbing fake news. The theory is further helpful in understanding whether the Association provided space for learning with others, with particular focus on the key shared values in the learning process, values that largely foreground ethical behaviour. According to Wenger (1991), learning takes place through relations between three groups; that is, between "masters" (or "old-timers"), "young masters" (or "journeymen") and "apprentices" (or "newcomers"). During interviews, less experienced bloggers argued that they learnt a lot from more experienced bloggers. Thus, old timers (senior and more experienced bloggers) helped less experienced bloggers (young masters and apprentices) to grasp the essential elements of blogging. For example, asked about how internal relations were critical in the processes of shared learning, an interviewee stated that:

The groups also consist of experienced journalists, the likes of the online editor for Alpha Media Holdings<sup>2</sup>, who impart certain skills and knowledge to the young ones ... these are skills that rub off as a result of experience (Interview with the Association's Secretary General, October 2017, Harare).

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<sup>2</sup> Alpha Media Holdings (AMH) is the biggest independent media house in Zimbabwe. It publishes four newspapers: The Zimbabwe Independent (a business weekly published every Friday), The Standard (a weekly published every Sunday) NewsDay and the Southern Eye (both daily newspapers)

In agreement, a blogger said:

... seeing how they write their content, we as young beginners get to learn how to package news stories as well. But in as much as we learn from them, we still want to retain our individual identity ... (Interview with Tendai, October 2017).

In a community of practice, “members develop the sense of trust and mutual obligation that is critical to encourage contribution and sharing of ideas and knowledge” (Lesser & Everest, 2001:39). One of the core principles of a community of practice is learning with others as a way of improving the practice, and this sharing of ideas is critical to the growth and achievement of community objectives. For a community of practice, learning is an ongoing process, requiring commitment over a long period of time. This is important insofar as continuous learning helps members improve the mastery of their trade. During interviews, members of the Association expressed the desire to continuously learn and train members in the art of blogging.

Specifically, the Association’s President stated:

Importantly also, all our members are also going to go through some basic training [learning with others] in journalism. Yes it’s very important that we are going to be doing that for our members. We are working around with many other associations that are willing to do this for us. We will do a lot of these sessions and training, more than journalism e.g. photography, videography, ethics, standards, how to report, how to protect your sources, etc. (Interview with the Association’s President, October 2017, Harare).

Another interviewee had this to say:

We are going to have more intense training; we are not just going to be sitting. It is going to be a formal Association where we want our members to also benefit from the actual training and learn how best to do their job (Interview with Bridget, July 2017, Harare).

However, for this group to foster sustained group cohesion and strict observation of its code of ethics, more needs to be done towards not only strengthening group affiliation, but also implementing effective deterrent measures capable of curbing the recurrence of fake news among group members. As it stands, the voluntary nature of the Association creates room for impunity, and members can easily take advantage of the Association’s limited “disciplining” capacity. These sentiments were raised during interviews, as members of the Association argued that even though offending members could be handed over to the media ethics body, the Voluntary Media Council of Zimbabwe (VMCZ) for censure, the mechanism for reprimanding offenders was not a sufficient deterrent to stop repeat offenders. One young man had this to say:

I think there might be limited cohesion at the moment because this group acts like a self-regulatory body. For example, if someone writes a story that damages someone's reputation, they are called for a hearing through the VMCZ. But beyond that there is nothing more. There are no punitive measures or structures in place to stop repeat offenders. One just goes through a hearing, given a warning and that's it (Interview with Allen, August 2017, Harare).

One blogger agreed:

We do not have arresting powers [laughs]. So when someone violates the code, we send him to the VMCZ. The VMCZ has limited powers in terms of what it can do (Interview with Susan, August 2017, Harare).

As was noted above, a combination of factors is necessary for the realisation of the group's goals. First, a sense of belonging was cited as a binding principle that compels members to feel obliged to the group's objectives. However, as a second factor, the limited disciplinary powers of the group leave room for abuse and impunity. A foreseeable unintended consequence, however, of increasing such powers, would be that increasing the disciplinary power in communities of practice would be antithetical to the dictum of voluntarism that is at the very root of communities of practice. This is one of the contradictions that emerge from well-intended associations, and more research is needed to explore ways of addressing these imbalances.

## ***6.2 The peer review and code of ethics as means of self-regulation***

One of the research questions in this study sought to understand aspects of the agreed oversight mechanisms of the Association of online content creators and their potential for curbing fake news among members. When asked about how the code is successful in bringing members together, respondents stated that:

The code has forced people to say, you know what, we created this together? If I am not going to write such kind of a story and deliberately lie that the president has died only for the sake of getting "clicks", and tomorrow the president is addressing the nation, it doesn't make sense, you know. It costs you your credibility; it can even cost you legal fees (Interview with Tau, October 2017, Harare).

Another proffered the following:

It's the code, and what your colleagues think of you and your reputation. These things force you not to just think about the clicks of the day and just say "ok I will deal with that later on". Getting the clicks for the wrong reason doesn't help you in the long run (Interview with Shingi, October 2017, Harare).

As stated earlier in the introduction, this code of ethics was enforced together with a peer review system where members provide oversight of each other's work. It was thus imperative to understand how successfully the group provides monitorial oversight over members' conformity to agreed standards. Asked about how important the group is in enforcing compliance, one member argued:

We have worked well as a group, because I hear people say, "If I am going to be doing this [creating or spreading fake news], one way or the other I am going to be asked by my fellow associates why I am doing this especially because we all know the brand we are trying to maintain" (Interview with Hebert, October 2017, Harare).

In this article, giving the power to fellow peers to review each other's work may be a novel form of intervention involving journalism practitioners themselves taking responsibility to save the integrity of journalism. These efforts need to be complemented with technical means of intervention. Globally, technology companies have also been developing applications and algorithms meant to curb fake news, even though the sincerity and veracity of these efforts have been fiercely critiqued. For example, Facebook and Twitter have been developing mechanisms involving giving users of these social networking platforms the option to "dispute" potentially fake news by flagging it.

In addition to the peer review mechanism mentioned above, part of the driving force leading to the formation of this association of online content creators was to avoid a foreseeable possibility that the government would intervene by regulating social media in Zimbabwe. Thus, in 2016 the government of Zimbabwe drafted a Computer Crime and Cyber Crimes Bill, which is yet to be approved by the parliament, while in 2017 a new Ministry was created – the Ministry of Cyber Security, Threat Detection and Mitigation – purportedly as an instrument to deal with abuse and unlawful conduct in cyberspace. According to the Association under study, the state regulatory machinery has dire implications for constitutionally guaranteed freedoms, including freedom of the media and freedom of expression. In the era of social media, for the Association, the online space has been the only space in Zimbabwe with a semblance of free expression and social exchange. For example, an interviewee stated that:

One of our biggest motives for creating this association is that we do not want government interference in how people disseminate online news. We should take ownership of our freedoms. The purpose of government is to do what people cannot do for themselves. So if we can responsibly regulate ourselves then government has no excuse for doing what we can do for ourselves (Interview with Judith, July 2017, Harare).

Another interviewee also stated:

We know that when the government regulates, the purpose is that politicians want to entrench themselves in power (Interview with Susan, July 2017, Harare).

A young blogger argues that:

If you give the government an opportunity to watch their watchdog (the media), you know what happens. You can't have them watching their own watchdog. The watchdog has to be independent (Interview with Tendai, August 2017, Harare).

Arguably, this association represents a movement towards self-regulation; a form of regulation that mainstream media has been advocating as a way to pre-empt government interventions in affairs sacrosanct to human and media freedom. As argued in the section above, self-regulation, with varying levels of success, has been adopted by many countries across the globe as central element of a democracy and free expression.

### **6.3 Relationship between Zimbabwe's political context and fake news**

One of the research questions sought to understand if there was a relationship between Zimbabwe's political context and the nature of fake news circulating in Zimbabwe's public sphere. Generally, the objective was to explore the connections and/or disconnections between fake news and Zimbabwe's political context, given the fact that both fake news and post-truth discourses emerged in given socio-political contexts. During interviews, members of the group argued that there was indeed fake news in Zimbabwe, and in order to understand how it was configured, it was imperative to critically analyse the political context that coalesced to structure the spread of fake news. Interview respondents argued that, in Zimbabwe, fake news was largely a reflection of popular but unexpressed public sentiments, in a socio-political context where freedom of expression remained the subject of state censorship. In other words, and as one respondent argued, fake news in Zimbabwe "reflects the mood of the nation":

What fake news in Zimbabwe does is that it taps into the mood of the nation. It is a mood of despair and lack of trust of the economic and political system in place. There is just too much political fighting in our news and there is no "breathing space" to take away frustrations from the ordinary man on the streets (Interview with Harry, July 2017, Harare).

Another weighed in:

In Zimbabwe it has mostly to do with people getting bored and needing something that keeps them going, even if it might be a false sense of moving on (Interview with the Association's Secretary General, September 2017, Harare).

Fake news therefore creates a temporary sense of reprieve from everyday drudgery, and it reflects attempts by ordinary people to "get by" the everyday conditions that characterise Zimbabwe's socio-political and economic environment. More pithily, some respondents expressed a strong sense of disillusionment and crushed hope, arguing that fake news

rides on this desperation. In 2017, the socio-political context was such that people would be susceptible to news that might hint at any change in the prevailing socio-economic and political quagmire:

Mostly, fake news in Zimbabwe takes advantage of the socio-political situation. It takes advantage of what people want to hear or are aspiring to hear about. Fake news feeds on that (Interview with Harry, September 2017, Harare).

The transcripts above show that fake news in Zimbabwe flourishes in a “parallel market” of ideas (arguably, these ideas are a mix of truths, falsehoods and unverified information) that speak to ordinary people’s wishes and sentiments, which sentiments are outside of the official public sphere mediated by mainstream media. As argued elsewhere in this article, social media provides an alternative space where constrained voices find an outlet in unofficial public spheres, and even perhaps influence official discourses. For instance, one may mention the successful 2016 public demonstrations and “stay-aways” sprung from subaltern underground movements such as the #ThisFlag movement and the Tajamuka-Sesijikile Campaign, which mobilised demonstrators mostly through WhatsApp messaging and video. This was mostly because WhatsApp was a key space for free expression owing to its anonymity and its ability to connect ordinary people in ordinary everyday networks. Interestingly, just to illustrate how complicated it is to trace the source of fake news, as well as to discriminate fake news from credible information, some members of the group were of the view that, at some point, the demonstrations that took place in July 2016 were hi-jacked by ordinary people keen on more demonstrations. These ordinary people masqueraded as leaders of the two movements named above. One member argued:

WhatsApp is a very powerful tool for people to carry out their personal motives, and even successfully pretend to be someone who they are not. During the most successful demonstrations which took place in July and August 2016, there were too many messages claiming to originate from the #ThisFlag and Tajamuka-Sesijikile movements, but were most likely not. You could see that people were riding on the demonstration mood to further mobilise demonstrators. Not that the demonstrations were bad, but I think some people claimed to be leaders of social movements that we all knew had become very popular, and were riding on that current (Interview with Elliot, September 2017, Harare).

Another member argued:

So when you look at the very successful stay away last year, I think that was very successful in a very large part due to fake news. I don’t know who the source of some of those messages, but certainly I doubt very much that all of them were from Mawarire and his associates. Some of the messages were not convincing, and had many errors, etc. That is why some calls for stay always were ignored because they didn’t look genuine (Interview with Tatenda, September 2017, Harare).



Arguably, observations from interviews with members of the group relate to some of the burgeoning psychological literature on self-deception, a concept whose definition roughly translates to “motivated false belief” (Von Hippel & Trivers, 2011; Trivers, 2011). In broad terms, self-deception is presumed to arise from a motivated desire to see the self and the world in ways that favour the self (Chance & Norton, 2015). In Zimbabwe, a context of high levels of political polarisation, and an environment characterised by speculations about the direction that the country should follow, are all responsible for despair and low levels of trust in mainstream politics and its institutions. More specifically, as more recent literature from the West indicates, people are likely to share fake news if it aligns with their preferred worldviews (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). During interviews, one male blogger stated:

But again, it's like people will share non-credible stories if it strongly aligns with their feelings or their thoughts. If the news agrees with you, even if it's untrue you are more likely to share it, you know (Interview with Harry, July 2017, Harare).

One female blogger argued:

If people do not like President Mugabe, fake news will mention it, and even lie that he is dead, or that he is in trouble. The assumption is that it might happen in reality and bring some relief or some joy among Zimbabweans who don't like him (Interview with Loice, July 2017, Harare).

It is thus arguable that there are close relationships between salient matters circulating in informal spheres of the public domain (particularly sentiments that circulate in informal social networks that represent the “people's” sentiments) and the nature of the fake news one is likely to find in any political context. In Zimbabwe, fake news seems to provide a form of catharsis from emotions provided by the everyday realities of poverty, lethargy and a general distrust of mainstream media and politics.

As most public spheres are largely dominated by powerful business and political elites, the less powerful, unofficial voices speak on, and from, the margins. As Nancy Fraser argues in her critic of Habermas' (1987) public sphere, the disempowered members of society represent the “weak publics” who do not hold decision-making powers, and are not capable of publicly expressing their concerns and make them into actionable policy. Fraser argues that these “weak” publics “constitute an informally mobilised body of nongovernmental discursive opinion that can serve as a counterweight to the state” (Fraser, 1992:75). In some ways, it is arguable that when ordinary Zimbabweans create enclaves for unofficial, even falsified discourses driven by fantasy and imagination, they are involved in active political engagement through “passive” resistance. There is thus need to investigate how everyday and seemingly benign uses of digital media technology might be constitutive of an everyday politics of survival and resistance. As Wasserman argues:

We need to find out what the domestication of mobile phones within a specific socio-cultural and politico-economic context in Africa tells us about people's engagement or disengagement with politics, how the popular relates to the political and everyday life links to democratic processes (2011:151).

Thus, according to Wasserman's (2011) arguments above, what might be viewed as everyday benign uses of digital media technologies might in some ways be indeed an active form of the everyday politics of resistance, just as one might view the spread of fake news in Zimbabwe as creating a sense of hope.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

The study sought to investigate if, and how, the notion of 'community of practice' may have conceptual and practical relevance for a group such as the Zimbabwe Online Content Creators. In addition, it also sought to understand how Zimbabwe's political context may have a bearing on the configuration of fake news. Members of this Association consisted of online content creators (bloggers, vloggers, satirists and animators). The study describes this group using Wenger's (1991) notion of a community of practice. Findings from this study showed that allowing peers to review the work of fellow group members exerted substantial influence in dissuading others from potentially creating and circulating fake news. When members strongly identify with the group's core values (in this case, values prescribed by journalism ethics such as truth, accuracy, fairness, balance and objectivity), there is a stronger likelihood that members will cooperate in curbing fake news, even though this is at a very micro level. In this study, members used terms such "feeling obliged" and not wanting to be "the only one spreading fake news" because, as one member put it, "one way or the other I am going to be asked by my fellow associates." Arguably, the community of practice discussed in this article offers an innovative starting point for fighting fake news, complementing other technical approaches used by technology companies such as Google, Twitter and Facebook. Mainstream media organisations, bloggers, vloggers and animators can use the power of their professional identity to come together as a buffer against fake news, in recognition of the changing configuration of information flow which has become predominantly an online phenomenon. However, as communities of practice are voluntarily based, they may lack authority and disciplinary power to enforce compliance with group norms, thereby running the risk that members can violate the same values with impunity. This does not, however, take away from the power of "community" to work towards shared professional goals. Through combined efforts involving newsrooms, technology organisations and the blogging community, a community of practice exerts better prospects for curbing fake news on the one hand, and on the other minimising substantial political intervention in the form of state regulation of online spaces. As has been seen in mainstream media, particularly in Africa and other parts of the world where media regulation threatens free media and free speech, government intervention has the potential to severely limit constitutionally guaranteed freedoms of expression and the freedom of the media to access, express and disseminate information.

This study argues that “remedies solely or heavily based on technological fixes or market-driven corrections will not, on their own, address these problems” (Moore, 2016:10) created by the spread of fake news. Rather, combined efforts involving newsrooms, technology organisations and the blogging community hold better prospects for curbing fake news.

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