

Blogging down a dictatorship: human rights, citizen journalists and the right to communicate in Zimbabwe

ABSTRACT

This article examines the use of blogs to mediate the experiences of citizens during a violent election in Zimbabwe. It focuses specifically on how people disseminated and shared information about their tribulations under a regime that used coercive measures in the face of its crumbling hegemonic edifice. The article frames these practices within theories of alternative media and citizen journalism and argues that digitisation has occasioned new counter-hegemonic spaces and new forms of journalism that are deinstitutionalised and deprofessionalised, and whose radicalism is reflected in both form and content. I argue that this radicalism in part articulates a postmodern philosophy and style as seen in its rejection of the elaborate codes and conventions of mainstream journalism. The Internet is seen as certainly enhancing the people's right to communicate, but only to a limited extent because of access disparities, on the one hand, and its appropriation by liberal social movements whose configuration is elitist, on the other. I conclude by arguing that the alternative media in Zimbabwe, as reflected by Kubatana's bloggers, lack the capacity to envision alternative social and political orders outside the neo-liberal framework. This, I contend, is partly because of the political economy of both blogging as a social practice and alternative media as subaltern spaces. Just as the bloggers are embedded to Kubatana's virtual space to self-publish, Kubatana is likewise embedded to a neo-liberal discourse that is traceable to its funding and financing systems.

INTRODUCTION

It is almost a truism now that the protracted crisis in Zimbabwe had a severe and debilitating impact on not only the principle of communicative democracy, but also the entire social, political and economic fabric of the country (Moyo, 2003; 2009 and 2010; Moyo & Chuma, 2010; Ranger, 2003). The neutralisation of both the public and the private media as spaces of civic engagement and public debate through legal and extrajudicial tactics by the state had a constraining impact on freedom of information and journalistic practice, just as it also violated many other constitutionally guaranteed civic and human rights. Laws, such as the Broadcasting Services Act (2001), the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) (2002), and the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) (2001), muzzled the news media and undermined their role as the watchdog of particularly the state. For example, while AIPPA, (contrary to its name), restricted easy access to government documents and information by the press, POSA essentially criminalised the journalism profession by introducing a long custodial sentence and hefty fines for journalists who were likely to cause public disorder or publish stories that risked engendering the hatred of either the president or the acting president of the country. Media freedom was further constrained by the use of threats, arrests, torture of journalists and the bombing of mostly private media's printing presses and offices (Moyo, 2007). This incapacitation and subsequent 'decapitation' of the mainstream media as watchdogs and custodians of the public good and active citizenship culminated in the development of alternative media platforms where citizens produced and disseminated news and told stories about the harsh realities of Zimbabwean life and politics. In some cases, these spaces were also seminal to public discussions and thus became informal counter-hegemonic public spheres where public opinion could be formulated, nurtured and sustained (Moyo, 2007). As is normally the case in authoritarian environments, the Internet in Zimbabwe thus became the platform through which most of these subaltern or anti-state discourses articulated and exerted themselves.

This paper discusses the Internet as an alternative medium and how citizens in Zimbabwe used it to mediate the crisis, particularly their experiences of suffering, deprivation, and dehumanisation. It looks at the people's narratives of the crisis and at its consequences for their welfare and human rights. The focus is on Kubatana web logs (blogs) and the period of study is the presidential election run-off campaign between April and June 2008. Judging from what local and international election observers said, the run-off election was largely characterised by violence and human rights abuses. Chief among these observer organisations was the Pan African Observer Mission (PAOM), a group that was made up of African Members of Parliament from various countries. This group reported that "the prevailing political environment throughout the country was tense, hostile and volatile" (PAOM, 2008:54). It stated that there were "high levels of intimidation, hate speech, violence, war rhetoric, displacement of people, abductions, and loss of life and many abuses of other rights and freedoms" (ibid:34). These claims were corroborated by, among other African regional groupings, the SADC Parliamentary Forum Observer Mission, which also noted that the conduct of the ruling party was not consistent with the principles of free and fair elections.

The selection of Kubatana is based on that it is a civic organisation involved in cyber activism to highlight democracy and human rights issues in the country. The organisation's website states that it has been publishing civic and human rights information in Zimbabwe for over five years and "approximately 2,500 people visit [their] website every day"¹. Its virtual community of bloggers can be said to be 'blogging for democracy' because they tell stories about the everyday experiences of citizens living in a volatile and perilous political environment. The paper analyses these experiences within alternative media theory while also endeavouring to frame the people's narratives as citizen journalism. As such, the theories of alternative media and citizen journalism underpin the contestations and arguments advanced in this article. In spite of the elusive and slippery nature of both concepts (see Atton, 2003; Gillmor, 2006; Kolodzy, 2006), they have, over the years, developed sufficient analytical currency to grapple with the profound and irreversible changes in the relationship between the media, state, and citizens occasioned by the Internet.

1. ALTERNATIVE MEDIA, CITIZEN JOURNALISM: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Atton (2002) argues that the conceptualisation of *alternative media* by both the proponents and antagonists of the concept has generally been weak, inadequate and superficial. He contends that a comprehensive model of what constitutes alternative media "must be as much concerned with how it is organised within its socio-cultural context as with its subject matter" (Atton, 2002:10). In other words, a theoretically sound framework of alternative media must pay attention not only to the various forms alternative media take, but also the nature of their content (including their epistemes) and their production and distribution processes. The multitheoretical approach, proposed by Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier (2008), gives a typology that endeavours to address the complex and multidimensional nature of the concept. These scholars posit that alternative media must serve the community, offer counter-hegemonic discourses to the mainstream, and be autonomous from the state and market influences (Bailey et al., 2008:5-33).

Alternative media - online or offline - must always be in service of the community. The community, defined in both spatial and non-spatial terms, suggests a closely knit collectivity that shares a common culture and history. However, this need not necessarily be geographic because communities can be based on interest, and furthermore, digital technologies like the Internet have brought about virtual communities or network societies that transcend the limits of time and space (Castells, 2000). From this perspective, alternative media can function as translocal institutions attending to and representing the interests of communities of interest not as territorially defined entities, but "as people sharing a common condition or problem" (Poppo, 1995:4). The Internet in particular is associated with deterritorialised and transnational alternative media systems and public spheres (See Moyo, 2009; Tettey, 2009).

One of the fundamental processes underpinning community service in alternative media is participation (Atton, 2002; Bailey et al. 2008; Waltz, 2005). Alternative media, especially online,

¹ See <http://kubatana.net/index.htm>, retrieved April 21, 2010.

are organised primarily “to enable wider social participation in the creation, production, and dissemination than is possible in the mass media” (Atton, 2002:25). While community participation is undoubtedly a kaleidoscopic concept, it is nonetheless very important in conceptualising the role of citizens in alternative media in that it underscores the importance of openness and access to such media. Participation implies the citizens’ direct and autonomous involvement in producing stories in the media and mediating their social experiences through the media. Bailey et al. (2008:11) argue that “participation *in* the media and *through* the media sees the communicative process not as a series of practices that are often restrictively controlled by media professionals, but as a human right that cuts across societies”. Consequently, participation is highly interwoven with the right to communicate, which citizens exercise not only within agreed constitutional limits, but also with a sense of civic responsibility to hold the state answerable to the people (See Dakrouy, 2006; Hamelink & Hoffmann, 2008). To this end, participation and citizen journalism as a form of alternative journalistic practice appear highly interwoven to the extent that it is difficult to speak of one to the exclusion of the other. As such, some scholars have variously defined citizen journalism as ‘participatory journalism’, ‘citizen-generated media’, ‘we media’, ‘grassroots media’, ‘self-service media’ so as to emphasize the notions of inclusion and participatory communication that are often embedded in alternative media (See Atton, 2002; Gillmor, 2006; Kalodzy, 2006;). Controversial as it might be, citizen journalism denotes “a philosophy of journalism and set of practices that are embedded within the everyday lives of citizens, and media content that is both driven and produced by those people” (Atton, 2002:267).

Alternative media - as opposed to mainstream media - are an increasingly dominant channel for citizen journalists. Yet, not all alternative media necessarily embody a civic attitude. Atton’s use of the word ‘philosophy’ is very important because it shows that there is nothing called ‘journalism’ as such, but there are different ways of thinking about journalism. While the mainstream philosophies of public, state, and corporate journalism conveniently disregard their philosophical statuses and attack citizen journalism as non-professional and ideological (See Allan, 2006; Moyo, 2009), they themselves represent institutionalised, capitalised, routinised and ‘professionalised’ methods of storytelling that privilege the powerful elite at the expense of ordinary citizens (See Atton, 2002; Hamilton, 2000). As will be demonstrated later in this article, citizen journalism is premised on a democratic participant philosophy that discourages a top-down model of public communication in favour of a bottom-up model that mainstreams the participation and empowerment of audiences in the communication process. New ICTs - the new architecture of alternative media forms - “seem to put the potential for communication liberation in the hands of the people and out of the hands of the publishing monopolies” (McQuail, 2005:184). Hence, most alternative media forms online and offline tend to articulate individualistic, group, or community-oriented discourses that epitomise their deinstitutionalised, people-centred, participative, and non-capitalised conditions of production.

Alternative media can also be conceptualised – perhaps more significantly – in terms of their counter-hegemonic role in society, which is often expressed in news values that embrace political or cultural radicalism (Atton, 2002; Bailey et al., 2008). Such media often do not only seek to challenge or question political and cultural control of the masses by the elite, but also demystify

the ruling elite's social engineering that is usually projected as natural and commonsensical by the mainstream media. Needless to say, alternative media and indeed citizen journalism are, epistemologically framed, oppositional to dominant worldviews and their social orders. They also often represent ideologies of the underdog. These rarely form part of the mainstream discourse in the elite media. In authoritarian environments found in both liberal and autocratic states, alternative media stories can covertly or overtly advance a social-change agenda through activism that underpins their informational and education roles in news dissemination (Waltz, 2005). For example, where mainstream media demonise and disenfranchise ordinary citizens who fight for better wages and working conditions, alternative media run by citizen journalists become the bastions of their rights, demystifying ideologies representing the oppressed and exploited as indignant, riotous and violent mobs (See Kavada, 2005). In the struggle to attributing meaning to events and human experience, alternative and citizen journalists are guided by the quest for active citizenship and the emancipation of the marginalised classes. The connotations brought by the notion of citizenship in citizen journalism have interesting ramifying effects on civic media as a form of alternative media and on citizen journalism as a social practice. Citizenship implies a commitment toward the public good in the political sphere. It is a sphere of rights and responsibilities. This commitment is based on a sense of civic duty to assert those liberties that are enjoyed individually or in unison with fellow citizens (See Falk, 2000; Held, 1993). According to Alejandro (1993:9), citizenship has been understood as "a set of civic attitudes, an emblem of civic participation, an arena where right-bearers unfold their personalities [and responsibilities]". In this regard, citizen journalism and alternative media must also be construed as being more than the mere dissemination of news and images by ordinary people because both embody a philosophy of journalism that seeks to emancipate the citizen from state and corporate propaganda. It is not simply journalism, but journalism with an attitude of seeing and interpreting reality from the point of view of those whom the mainstream constructs as the incomprehensible and irrational 'other'. It seeks to move the centre from the mediated grand narratives of the national elite to the self-articulated and self-published small narratives of the ordinary people in specific locales. Perhaps this is why the Center for Future Media at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) defines civic media, and by implication alternative media and citizen journalism, as "any kind of communication that strengthens the social bonds within a community or creates a strong sense of civic engagement among its residents. [It] goes beyond news gathering and reporting"². For alternative media, they are not simply media that deepen the illusion of choice from more of the same, but more fundamentally, media that articulate a different worldview and orders of reality as reflected in their content. For this reason, alternative media and citizen journalism do not only stand opposed to the state and any form of authority, but must enjoy institutional autonomy and editorial independence from both the state and market forces so as to allow "subordinated groups ... to produce non-conformist and sometimes counter hegemonic representations of the views of those marginalised, misrepresented and underrepresented in the public sphere" (Bailey et al., 2008:17).

Autonomy from the state or market forces implies that alternative media and citizen journalism are more amenable to civil society especially as "a sphere of public life beyond control of the state"

² See Center for Future Media Website, <http://civic.mit.edu/topics/civic-media>, retrieved May 17, 2010.

(Colas, 2002:25). If construed as a “bulwark against the state” (Keane, 2002:67), and “a buffer zone strong enough to keep both state and market ... from being too powerful and dominating” (Giddens, 2001:15), then civil society is clearly “the infrastructure that is needed for the spread of democracy and development” (Anheier et al., 2003:3). In principle, civil society’s vanguard role in democratisation as processes that are born from participatory communication, locates it within the same counter-hegemonic framework as alternative media and citizen journalism.

2. METHODOLOGY

Unstructured interviews were used to gather qualitative data from 12 bloggers who were randomly selected from a population of thirty-one. However, only five bloggers were willing to participate in the interviews. The reason for using the interview method was its efficacy in eliciting qualitative data about the bloggers’ ontological knowledge about their social practice of disseminating information through blogs. The main questions bloggers needed to answer were about their role in society and how they perceived blogging as a social practice. Their interview accounts provided useful means of understanding how the blogging was constructed and perceived through their experiences, accounts, and interpretations. As a method, interviews do not establish the truth, but interrogate what people think and why. As such, the accounts of bloggers provided useful material about their perceptions of blogging and its place in the struggle for democracy in Zimbabwe.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) was conducted to analyse both the interview data and the ‘news’ texts produced by the Kubatana bloggers in order to gauge the extent to which they articulated the social and political hegemonic struggles (Fairclough, 2001; Wodak & Meyer, 2001). As a textual analysis method, CDA focuses on texts as the “actual instances of discourse occurring in some concrete audio or visual material form” (Johnstone, 2002:19). Fairclough (2003) argues that texts are generally seen as rich in detail because they “represent aspects of the physical world, the social world, the mental world” (ibid:27). Language was central in understanding the representations of the crisis by bloggers in both their ‘news’ and interview accounts. CDA believes that language does not reflect reality in a neutral way; it interprets, organises and classifies the subject of discourse in an ideological way. Habermas (1985:124), for example, once argued that “language... is a medium of domination and social force. It serves to legitimise relations of organised power”. Similarly, language can also be a medium of resistance for the oppressed – one through which class conflict and other forms of inequalities are exposed.

3. INTERNET, CITIZEN JOURNALISTS AND THE SUBALTERN COUNTER-HEGEMONIES IN ZIMBABWE

The content of Kubatana’s bloggers demonstrates that the Internet and citizen journalism played an important role not only in mediating the crisis, but also in exposing human suffering during the run-off election. News stories ranged from allegations of vote rigging, violence, rape, abductions, torture, murder, to the general hunger and starvation that were characteristic of the crisis as it deepened. Bloggers wrote of “old men in burnt clothes who were escaping violence from the village”, “battered villagers recovering in hospitals”, “farm invasions” and farmers “with broken

collar bones and fingers”, “ruling party officials forcing people to rallies and forced confessions”, “acute water and electricity shortages”, and “empty supermarket shelves around the country”.

The concerns of most of these stories locate Zimbabwe’s Internet and citizen journalism within a counter-hegemonic framework that presupposes the development of a nascent - albeit enduring - subaltern space for ideological resistance. While Gramsci (1971) regards hegemony as particularly strong because it involves the willing and active consent of the dominated, he also believes that domination has to be constantly negotiated and renegotiated because ordinary people can still engage in a struggle over ideas and even mobilise themselves to resist. According to Fiske (1992:291), “consent must be constantly won and rewon”, because “people’s material social experience constantly reminds them of the disadvantages of subordination and thus poses a threat to the dominant class”. The rise of the Internet and citizen journalism and the concomitant free flow of information on sensitive issues about real or perceived state atrocities in Zimbabwe, have exposed the temporal and unstable nature of hegemony. Citizens, no matter how tight the shackles of oppression, always develop other means of contesting the constructions of ‘commonsense’ and ‘the natural’ through which the hegemonic knot of domination and subordination is tied. The Kubatana bloggers, as demonstrated in the four cases below, disseminate news that potentially shakes the foundations of Zimbabwe’s hegemonic project by foregrounding the anti-establishment discourses that threaten the survival of the political elite:

Case 1: Last night at about 9:30pm, I heard a lot of noise coming from Tshovani Township near Chiredzi. The next morning I asked several people what it was about and they all said that the residents were shouting for Mugabe to go ... A similar action has taken place in Zaka constituencies and I believe Masvingo also. There is a lot of despondence and also a lot of anger, people want to fight now (SMS to Kubatana blogged by Clarke, B. 28 April 2008).

Case 2: I’ve just been to the CABS (bank) queue. The limit on cash withdrawals is Z\$1 billion a day. At the supermarkets and the wholesalers, shelves are empty except for a few packets of chips and rotting vegetables. Maize meal, sugar, milk and soap are non-existent! (Clarke, B. 28 April 2008).

Case 3: Hon. Mahlangu, the MDC MP for Nkulumane constituency in Bulawayo ... is battling for his life in intensive care unit after armed Zanu PF militia attacked him yesterday as he and other MDC youth were on their way to the Glamis Arena for a star rally. Over a thousand Zanu PF thugs were bussed to the venue (Atwood, A.B. 23 June 2008).

Case 4: More than 2000 youth militia are on the rampage in Mbare carrying out random attacks on innocent citizens. Casualty departments in Harare are already receiving injuries from these attacks. Amongst the injuries recorded so far are bayonet wounds... This latest incident demonstrates how the militarization of the electoral environment has made the holding of free and fair elections impossible (Reeler, B. 28 May 2008).

What is clear from some of these cases is not only concern over human rights abuses, but also the mundanely written and stylised news narratives that fall within the idiom of everyday speech. The 'deprofessionalised' nature of the news, as stated earlier, is one of the primary characteristics of alternative media discourses. In most cases, Kubatana bloggers use no sources, no by-lines, and have no pretensions towards objectivity and balance. Although they perform an important role of informing and educating the public about the crisis, they however do not perceive themselves as objective and disinterested mediators because they tell stories about everyday life of which they are part. For example, extrapolations from the above cases show that just like ordinary people they queue in banks, they are affected by food shortages, and as the quote below shows, they mediate the crisis in which they are also active agents who fight against the violation of citizen rights:

This morning four of us (bloggers) piled into a car and went to observe a Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA) gathering down town. They wanted to deliver a petition to the Zambian embassy requesting SADC to get more involved in helping to solve the Zimbabwean crisis... Public actions like WOZA's give me hope. But their actions need to be multiplied and replicated all over Harare and other parts of Zimbabwe to create pressure on the illegitimate Mugabe regime (Clarke, B. 7 May 2008).

Unlike the mainstream journalists, citizen journalists do not operate on an illusion of freedom from society, but their storytelling is based on a realistic acceptance of the fact that they are situated interpreters of reality in terms of class, gender, race, and ethnicity. In that sense, citizen journalism, as opposed to mainstream journalism, is reflexive and conscious of its ideological baggage. This has resonance with the age-old truth propounded mostly by the Marxian scholarship, that while the so-called professionals falsely claim to be neutral and distanced observers and critics of events, they are "actually locked into a power structure [and] act largely in tandem with the dominant institutions in society" (Curran, Gurevich & Woollacott, 1995:2). As Schudson (2003:154) explains, "political institutions and media are...so thoroughly engaged in a complex dance with each other, that it is not easy to distinguish where one begins and the other leaves off". Media, as he further argues, "do not define politics anymore than political structures dictate news" (ibid:154). The news text itself does not mirror or reflect the truth, but is always a site for ideological contestation in the struggle for attributing meaning and salience to events (See Fiske, 1994).

The language mostly used by Kubatana bloggers reflects the anger of the writers against the status quo, and seems to be subservient to the greater cause of resisting authoritarianism rather than to upholding some journalistic standards as prescribed by the mainstream. From this perspective, alternative media and citizen journalism can also be activist in orientation. O'Sullivan (1994), for example, posits that activism in the sense of advocating radical social change must be a key attribute of alternative media. While Kubatana bloggers do not always advocate specific political action for citizens against state power, one can still detect elements of advocacy journalism in which they castigate electoral violence as 'thuggish' and upbraid government for the shortage of food and other basics. At this level, Kubatana bloggers appear to have multiple identities. They are essentially active citizens, concerned activists, but also 'journalists' as they also produce and

distribute news about the happenings in their communities. They represent ‘unfiltered’, ‘raw’, and ‘unaestheticised’ journalism in the sense of negating the institutional dictates and professional myths of objectivity, balance and accuracy. However, this is not to suggest that citizen journalism and mainstream journalism are mutually exclusive. On the contrary: their relationship is a dialectical one where they sometimes complement, compete, or even challenge one another (Lowrey, 2006; Robinson, 2006; Thorsen, 2008). For instance, in Thorsen’s study of Wikinews, a website that allows people to write, edit, and publish news in a collaborative manner, noted that this form of citizen journalism extensively appropriated the stylistic devices of mainstream journalism, such as objectivity, accuracy, and neutrality. In fact, Case 3 (page 48) in this article demonstrates that even though the Kubatana bloggers write about emotive subjects, such as political violence to which they are susceptible, they also borrow the styles and tones of the mainstream.

It is interesting that Kubatana bloggers exposed electoral violence and human rights abuse by the ruling party. This may be indicative of both a hegemonic crisis in the ruling elite and the diminishing power of state media as instruments of the origination and shaping of public opinion. Gramsci (1971:80), while acknowledging the combination of force and consent in hegemony, also stresses the need for “balance... [where] force [should not] predominate excessively over consent”. When force dominates consent-making institutions such as in Zimbabwe, then the hegemonic grip of the elite on the masses would have slipped away thus opening an opportunity for the alternative media to become the new epicentres of hegemony for the resisting classes. Moyo (2007) coins the term ‘alternative-mainstream’ to describe Zimbabwe’s phenomenon of a gradual shift by the subaltern from the fringes of public participation into the centre of the national public sphere (See Moyo, 2007). Beverly Clarke, one of the main bloggers argued that “I get the sense that a lot of Zimbabweans who are connected use sites such as Newzimbabwe, Kubatana, and others to get their news, opinion and other information rather than established newspaper websites” (Interview, 29 January 2010). She views the blogger as adding to the diversity of voices in the public sphere and opines that “it’s up to individual readers to determine the veracity of what they are reading” (ibid, January 2010).

4. ACCESS, PARTICIPATORY POLITICS AND ZIMBABWE’S ‘FIFTH ESTATE’

The concept of the Internet and citizen journalism as the ‘Fifth Estate’ is always used in relation to and in contestation of the mainstream media as the ‘Fourth Estate’ after the judiciary, legislature, and executive (See Al-Rodhan, 2007; Dutton, 2008; McQuail, 2003). While both corporate and public media perceive themselves as performing a watchdog role in society, they essentially serve the interests of the business and political elite (See Bagdikian, 2004; Coteau & Hoynes; 2000; Moscow, 1996). The Fourth Estate, in spite of its liberal posturing, in reality services and protects corporate and state power while playing an ideological and hegemonic role with regard to citizens. As McQuail (2003:52) observes, “the self-assigned Fourth Estate model over privileges the powerful established media in comparison with ordinary citizens”. Because these powerful established media are owned and controlled by the elite, the Fourth Estate enjoys editorial freedom only to the degree that it does not affect their fundamental interests in the political and economic order of the day (Murdock, 1995).

The Fifth Estate has developed partly in response to the said limitations of the Fourth Estate. The concept has generally been used to refer to the Internet and other digital media that have empowered the citizen to 'speak' independent of the gatekeeping from mainstream media (Al-Rodhan, 2007; Dutton, 2008). Epistemologically premised on the democratic participant theory, the Fifth Estate advances the people's right to communicate, freedom of information, bottom-up communication, interactivity, multidirectionality and multimodality.

The Kubatana blogosphere is a practical manifestation of how the Internet as an alternative medium and citizen journalism as a counter-hegemonic practice express the people's right to communicate. Unlike the Fourth Estate of corporate and state media, the Fifth Estate is the property of the people as reflected in terms such as 'citizen-generated media', 'we media', 'participatory journalism', 'grassroots media', 'doing media' and 'self-service media' (See Gillmor, 2006; Kolodzy, 2006). No longer are Zimbabwean citizens helplessly bombarded with messages by the mass media: they are actually actively producing news and initiating news flows among themselves, and, between themselves and the outside world. Through the Kubatana blogs, we are witnessing a paradigmatic shift from the Fourth Estate of news and information consumers to the Fifth Estate of news and information 'prosumers' defined by interactivity that entails "a more powerful sense of user engagement with media texts [and] a more independent relation to sources of knowledge" (Lister et al, 2003:20). If Zimbabwe's Fourth Estate was characterised by mass audiences and top-down communication, its Fifth Estate is characterised by what Bell (2009) refers to as 'doing media' - media that enable users to participate in formulating, modifying and disseminating its content (Steuer, 1992:84). Hence, the Fifth Estate marks the nascent stages of participatory digital politics in Zimbabwe where freedom of information, as opposed to censorship, is the basis of storytelling by the blogging 'netizens'. The deinstitutionalisation of journalism and alternative media is not only a harbinger of the freedom of the storyteller, but also of the news narrative whose codes and conventions and content are now left to the individual to decide. For example, Kubatana bloggers presented pictures of human rights victims and victim accounts that would easily have been censored in the institutionalised mainstream media in Zimbabwe. Oftentimes, full victim accounts were lumped together with bloggers' news thus circumventing the problem of selection and exclusion that is often endemic to mainstream representation of the news (Schudson, 2003). This free flow of information is corollary to the health and effectiveness of the Fifth Estate as an alternative space for uncensored news.

Yet Zimbabwe's Fifth Estate is undermined by problems of access and participation. Only 1.4 million people are consistent users of the Internet (See World Internet Statistics, 27 January 2010). Hence, while enjoying significant levels of autonomy, Zimbabwe's Fifth Estate essentially remains a peripheral public sphere in terms both of agenda setting and influencing the national public opinion. This frustration was evident from the bloggers who were interviewed who felt that while their news was produced purely in the public interest, their impact was however undermined by low levels of access. One blogger feels that "the state sees bloggers as too insignificant to cause any trouble" (Msoza, 29 January 2010), while another argues that this is because "the state in Zimbabwe recognises that the Internet is generally only reaching a small portion of society, and for the most part, reaching those that are already firmly against its policies" (Pietrzyk, 3 February

2010). However, the central point of the democratic-participant theory (and by implication the Fifth Estate) lies not only with access and participation, but also with citizens' "needs, interests and aspirations of [being] active 'receivers' in a political society" (McQuail, 2003:122). While the Internet has enhanced the right to communicate for a significant minority of Zimbabweans, what is important is how citizens have appropriated that right to create a vibrant Fifth Estate whose political worth is reflected through its contribution to substantive democracy and active citizenship.

5. THE PROBLEM OF EMBEDMENT: PARROTING THE MASTER'S VOICE?

Conceptually, alternative media can be "considered the 'third voice' between state media and private commercial media" (Bailey et al., 2008:23). Structurally, it occupies the same space as civil society, thus invariably making it part of civil society's democratisation agenda. While the conceptualisation of civil society is by no means simple nor straightforward, my definitions in the preceding sections described it as a space between the state and the market, a "space in which alternative conceptualisations of the political and economic systems can develop and thrive" (ibid: 21). The protracted crisis in Zimbabwe created an environment conducive for civil society to ask questions about the social order and be in the vanguard for social change. The crisis required civil society to demonstrate independence of thought and judgement that goes beyond the state's official nationalism narrative and neoliberalism's populist free-market sound bites. The concept of embedment here is borrowed from war-reporting studies that question the idea of assigning journalists to travel with an army unit in a war or conflict. This is seen as heavily compromising the journalist ethically in that the risk of becoming an integral part of the army worldview and logic is perceived as high.

Given the above, it is interesting then to examine the extent to which Kubatana's bloggers or citizen journalists had the capacity to think outside the 'ideological boxes' of the state and the market. Nearly all the bloggers who used the Kubatana blogosphere were critical of the state and the political order, though not of the market and its economic order. In a different piece, discussing other Kubatana discourses that existed outside the blog I argue that while Kubatana's role in democratisation in Zimbabwe is unquestionable, its focus on political rights and political governance at the expense of economic rights and economic governance is however problematic (Moyo, 2009). As other scholars have observed, Zimbabwe's electoral crisis was merely a symptom of a much broader problem that had its roots in the land issue and the 1990s neo-liberal economic reforms, which created an economy based on serious racial disparities and further also nurtured a culture of state violence mostly on Zimbabwe's working classes and students (Saunders, 2000). However, none of the bloggers embedded to the Kubatana civic group criticised either the subversion of economic democracy by post-colonial settler capital or the global forces that resisted agrarian reform and administered the failed economic reforms of the nineties (See Sachikonye, 2003). Hence, while citizen journalism in Kubatana appears to be operating in a deinstitutionalised environment, it is in reality operating in institutionalised virtual environments where the general aura of discourses is neoliberal. In other words, Kubatana bloggers as citizen journalists take the thematic cues from the website and their stories are based on institutional modelling whose

template goes beyond Kubatana to embrace nearly the entire civic movement in the country. As embedded journalists, they speak the hollow human rights language of Zimbabwe's civil society, which reflects a selective articulation dictated by Western donors who exercise allocative control of the entire counter-hegemonic establishment. Consequently, the bloggers criticise political violence of the state, but not the economic violence of local and global capital against ordinary Zimbabweans. As such, while the problem of selection and exclusion is not immediately apparent in Kubatana's embedded bloggers, it lies at the core of how the crisis is framed and represented in their blogs. Thus, the major problem with embedment of alternative media to civil society in Zimbabwe is that it is developing a form of citizen journalism that lacks financial and editorial autonomy. Zimbabwe's civil society itself is in a state of crisis resulting from financial dependence and ideological bankruptcy because of neoliberalism's grip on young and emerging democracies globally (See Hassan, 2004). From this perspective, while civil society and alternative media certainly play a counterhegemonic role against the state, they are also simultaneously a site for domination and market hegemony. Where the state uses violence, Kubatana and its bloggers use the efficacy of consent that disciplines citizens to be loyal subjects of an equally violent and emasculating capitalist order.

6. COUNTER-HEGEMONIES AND THE POSTMODERN TURN OF THE SUBALTERN

The Internet has transformed alternative media and alternative journalism as social practices. As stated earlier, subaltern spaces are increasingly translocal, while journalism has become characterised by increased participation, multimodality and multidirectional flows, thus rejecting the old models of top-down unidirectionality. The decentring and deterritorialisation of the 'newsroom' has made information in dictatorships more accessible through the participation of people with access to the Internet. Citizen journalism, a phrase that has been used to encapsulate this experience, is slowly moving to the centre as explained by one blogger who states that in Zimbabwe, "it's increasingly difficult to distinguish between blogs and information that once was only available in print" (Pietrzyk, Interview, 03 February 2010). She adds: "I imagine that many people reading blogs view them as a form of journalism. In Zimbabwe, I suspect many people view certain blogs as more citizen-oriented and trustworthy journalism" (ibid, 2010). Another blogger believes that blogging in Zimbabwe constitutes journalism: "Yes I believe I am a journalist, just not your conventional kind" (Msonza, Interview, 29 January 2010).

To a certain extent, the advent of citizen journalism also means that the epistemes of mainstream journalism are being challenged and alternative forms of journalism are emerging. Traditional mainstream journalism is predicated on the epistemologies of empiricism, realism and objectivism - philosophies that see the truth and reality as largely ontological and something to be observed and gathered out there. Citizen journalism, as seen through its confluences with the digital alternative spaces, is moving away from these epistemes and embracing a hermeneutic, constructivist and postmodern approach to journalism where the notion of objective truth or objective reality is rejected. Social reality and the truth as embedded in the news narrative no longer exists, but is perceived as perspectival in character. Hence, Kubatana as a blogosphere does not celebrate truth telling as such, but rather the diversity and plurality of news and opinions as reflected through

the participation of its many bloggers. Kubatana bloggers do not claim to tell the truth, but to give a certain version of it and with a specific attitude to it. As one interviewee stated, “as a blogger, what I write tends to be activist oriented. If one defined my blogging as a form of journalism, then as a journalist I am activist oriented” (Pietrzyk, Interview, 03 February 2010).

While Kubatana has many bloggers who use various styles - from the journalistic, activist, meditative, to the provocative - its journalistic genre is fluid and open. The news narrative itself is taking a postmodern form, rejecting the elaborate formal aesthetics of the codes and conventions of mainstream journalism. Mainstream journalism, with its emphasis on facts and accuracy, reflects a profession that celebrates enlightenment’s excitement with science and modernisation’s fetishisation of technical rationality. Citizen journalism must therefore not be judged on the basis of what mainstream journalism is, but instead on what news is. At its core, journalism is about disseminating information/narratives structured under historically determined codes and conventions while news really is about new information. However, like traditional journalists, bloggers are going beyond that - to “write in ways that generate comments” and “put conversations into motion” (Pietrzyk, 2010). Others, as one respondent stated, “write primarily to raise storm” and “create fearless debates” (Machirori, Interview, 29 January 2010). To that end, citizen journalism and civic media as alternative media serve not only to create a sense of collective membership and the destiny of a community facing a crisis, but also of active citizenship as characterised by critical public debate and action for positive social change. Participation, no matter how variously defined and structured, must be the sinew of alternative citizen media and citizen journalism.

7. CONCLUSION

A further characterisation of the transformations that are taking place in Zimbabwean media systems may be necessary as a conclusion to this article. First and foremost, the radicalism - in form and content - of alternative media and citizen journalism must be seen as one informed by the political context of state repression and violence. This radicalism is enhanced by the Internet, which not only provides a safe haven for bloggers, but is amenable to their innovative social practices of producing and sharing information resulting from digitisation. While I have used the term *counter-hegemonies* consistently throughout the article, which automatically locates Zimbabwe’s alternative media and citizen journalism within a Marxian discourse, it has to be explained that Kubatana bloggers are not revolutionaries seeking to uproot Zimbabwe’s political and economic status quo. They are only moral reformists who are concerned with the particular leadership style or the grammar of politics, and not the entire edifice of the ruling elite. I risk the term ‘liberal-counter hegemonies’ to describe what Cohen (1985:664) calls the ‘self-limiting radicalism’ that is characteristic of civil society of a unipolar dispensation. In a sense, one could argue about the crisis of the alternative that is reflected in the conservatism of the alternative media and its alternative journalisms. One of the reasons for this weakness is that both are saddled on the idealism of the neo-liberal discourse that empowers them as the watchdog of the state, but this simultaneously deprives them of the capacity to conceptualise the alternative in truly radical ways. As such, while there are changes in the way the new journalism articulates itself, the journalist essentially remains of a middle-class orientation where elite continuity in governance is

not seen as a problem. The right to communicate through the Internet (both its form and content) has arguably been appropriated and monopolised by the blogger whose legitimacy is based on working with civil society. Yet, while civil society in Zimbabwe justifies itself on grounds of inclusivity, it is in reality exclusive in its exclusion of the working classes and the rural population.

ENDNOTE

It was difficult to elicit information on the funding of Kubatana as the Directors consider such information to be confidential. However, in Zimbabwe, civic organisations with a liberal agenda are generally funded by Western donors.

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