The power of citizen journalism in Zimbabwe
By Shepherd Mpofu

This article explores how the internet has become a platform for Zimbabweans to exercise their right to freedom of expression given the repressive conditions within their country. The article does this by examining the online debates on the 1980s genocide in the website www.newzimbabwe.com. Theoretically the article uses the alternative digital public sphere theory. The article argues that the proliferation of citizen journalism aided by the “internet, world-wide web [WWW], mobile phones, etc”¹ (Banda, 2010: 25) has made it possible for counter-hegemonic voices (Mitra, 2001) to upset the elite and politically dominated public spheres. The internet is credited for simultaneously enabling the user to exercise the right to freedom of expression through receiving and disseminating information, ideas and opinions visually or phonetically to large audiences at the lowest possible cost. Also, this evolution of technology has caused global dramatic changes in the field of journalism. Of particular interest in this article is how this alternative digital public sphere offers Zimbabweans an avenue to discuss a taboo subject in Zimbabwe without fear or being reprimanded by the secretive and authoritarian state. The ‘taboo’ in this context refers to issues that the state does not want discussed in public like the president’s health, genocide, Zanu-Pf factionalism or succession debate and state sponsored corruption just to mention but a few. The state has tabooed the genocide debates within Zimbabwe for national cohesion and Zanu-Pf’s political expediency. Most precisely, the article explores how the internet has challenged the elitist dominated domestic public sphere into a sphere where ordinary citizens interact among themselves and those in power. There may not be direct communication between the elite and the ordinary people but the intertextuality of debates alludes to some form of speaking to each other. In addition offline debates by political leaders seem alive to the fact that Zimbabweans are ‘privately’ discussing the ‘taboo.’ Before proceeding with the discussion it is imperative that I map out the journey of this article. Firstly I attempt to contextualise issues within the public sphere theory, then I introduce the debates around the genocide for reasons that will become clear later before delving into the online debates.

Citizen Journalism as alternative public spheres

The expression of this freedom is located within the ambit of what Jurgen Habermas termed the public sphere an ideal platform where intelligent deliberation rather than coercion was a marker of democratic governance and decision making. New media present themselves as this agora in a digital incarnation defined by Habermas as:

[A] realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens… with the guarantee of

freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions—about matters of general interest. (Habermas, 1989: 73-74)²

Central to this article is an endeavor to adapt Habermasian public sphere theory to internet studies and show how new media is used to subvert elite public spheres in the Zimbabwean context. Dumisani Moyo’s (2006) research on diasporic media and their mediation of the Zimbabwean crisis attests to this fact as he argues that online media have created alternative spaces, arenas, texts and mediums where marginalised groups negotiate and debate issues outside the control of government. He observes about the Zimbabwean situation that:

Restricted democratic space has spawned a multiplicity of alternative public spheres that enable groups and individuals to continue to participate and engage in the wider debate on the mutating crisis gripping the country since the turn of the century…the diaspora are creatively exploiting new media to resist state propaganda churned out through the mainstream media. (2006: 81)

This has made the centrality of digital public spheres in political discourses indisputable in Zimbabwe as they variously contribute to the salient democracy debates as ‘alternative’ digital public spheres (Shuval 2000³ and Chan 2005⁴). Zimbabweans use new media for various reasons and I shall offer two main ones. Firstly, new media in the form of online radio stations like Studio 7, SW Africa and others, websites like www.newzimbabwe.com, www.zimonline.co.za, www.zimdiaspora.com and personal blogs are public spheres alternative to the one dominated by the government controlled public media. Secondly, they offer audiences a chance to be both consumers and producers (prosumers) of content—an order foreign to traditional media forms like radio, television and newspapers especially in authoritarian states like Zimbabwe. Whereas the public media offer biased coverage of events (Nyahunzwi 2001; Waldahl 2004⁵) and systematically bar voices critical of Zanu-Pf from being heard, new media offer those counter-hegemonic, excluded voices and those that perpetrate these exclusions access to a platform to debate issues of common public interest. For example Zanu-Pf politburo member and former Minister of Information Jonathan Moyo is one of the columnists of newzimbabwe.com which is the concern of this paper as a social media in the form that has enabled debate on the genocide issue an issue silenced in the

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The alternative digital public spheres are alternative in that they point “to the need for greater empowerment of the large majority of ordinary people removed and disfranchised from the media and political public spheres,” (Bailey, et. al., 2007: xii). Alternative media have gone noticed by the powerful. At the World Summit on the Information Society in 2003, President Mugabe described the internet as being used by the “aloof immigrant settler landed gentry, all royal, all untouchable, all western supported” former colonists and some powers as a conduit:

...through which virulent propaganda and misinformation are peddled to de-legitimise our just struggles against vestigial colonialism... to weaken national cohesion and efforts at forging a broad Third World front against what patently is a dangerous imperial world order led by warrior states and kingdoms (Mugabe, 2003).

Newzimbabwe.com, a website based in Wales, is used here to analyse news stories that cover these taboo discourses mainly because it offers a platform with a hitherto unknown technological characteristic in traditional media that is only a preserve of new media; that of user generated content in the form of reader comments for readers to debate issues. This makes the site interactive and highly engaging. It recreates, in a sense, an agora where people gather and discuss issues of common concern. Added to that it is famous among Zimbabweans in the homeland and diaspora for being the first serious website to cover Zimbabwean news. The newzimbabwe.com website is largely funded by advertisements (Willems and Mano, 2006) and is characterised by blogs, columns and sports, entertainment and political news.

Genocide discourses that are prevalent in newzimbabwe.com seek to upset the dominant exclusivist notions advanced by Zanu-PF in public media. There is consensus that deliberations in the elite Zimbabwean public sphere have been informed by the “asymmetrical power relations and a struggle for domination... [where] consensus is always at least partially a result of hegemony, a stabilization of meaning aided by cultural domination and exclusion,” (Dahlberg, 2007: 835). The

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6 It has to be highlighted at this juncture that even though Zimbabwe has three political parties in government, Zanu-PF conspicuously dominates and controls the public media. Therefore it is expedient for the arguments of this article to make a clear distinction that the mainstream public sphere and media are public owned but Zanu-PF controlled rather than government controlled.


8 Speech By His Excellency President Robert Gabriel Mugabe Of Zimbabwe On The Occasion Of The World Summit On The Information Society, Geneva, Switzerland, 10th December, 2003

articulation of these excluded disparate voices establishes what Dahlberg calls ‘a counter-hegemonic front,’ leading to opposition of dominant discourses.

**Gukurahundi Genocide: A bad birthmark**

Two years after independence Zanu-Pf delivered the country into one of the most violent episodes of civil war that left over 20 000 people dead (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2009; Masunungure, 2006\(^\text{10}\)). The event which was later declared genocide by a United States based Non-Governmental Organisation, Genocide Watch, saw Mugabe let loose a North Korean trained military outfit against people from Zimbabwe’s Matabeleland North, South and Midlands. The severity of the genocide is captured in the following paragraphs from *Genocide Watch*:

- Genocide is a special crime against humanity, because it must be intentionally carried out against a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group.

- The Gukurahundi meets the definition of genocide because it was carried out by the North-Korean trained, exclusively Shona Fifth Brigade under President Mugabe and it targeted ethnic Matabele people.\(^\text{11}\)

The genocide, code-named Gukurahundi (the rain that washes away chaff after harvesting) lasted until 1987 when Nkomo’s Zimbabwe African People’s Union-Patriotic Front (Pf-Zapu) decided to merge with Mugabe’s ruling party to save more lives.

What follows is an online engagement on the debates to do with this genocide. The main point is not the veracity of the people’s assertions but the need to highlight the fact that the internet dislodges the authority of elite discourses in the given Zimbabwean political climate. For instance, a story *Police shut down a Gukurahundi exhibition*\(^\text{12}\) shows how sensitive the issue is to Zanu-Pf. The exhibition was meant to commemorate and remember the victims of genocide through art. Artist Owen Maseko “collected family photos of missing people, images of mine shafts where bodies were believed dumped,” for his work. While the country’s Prime Minister argued that such exhibitions are “part of a campaign for national healing,” the fact of the matter is that trying to address, understand and remember the victims of this dark period in the history of the country is criminal.

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The above shows criminalisation of genocide memory and this does not only apply to ordinary citizens but former opposition politicians serving in the coalition government are equally affected. A case in point is the Minister of the misnamed National Healing and Reconciliation, Andrew Mzila-Ndlovu’s arrest for attending a memorial service for the victims of the genocide.\textsuperscript{13} Besides criminalisation and making it hard for people in the homeland to discuss the issue and other forms of repressive erasure of the issue from memory, diasporic media like newzimbabwe.com have made it possible for people to openly discuss the issue without the risk of arrest or sanction.

In 2010 the year when Zimbabwe’s neighbour, South Africa was hosting the soccer world cup, the North Korean team was meant to have a pretournament training camp in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe\textsuperscript{14} a part of the region where the massacres took place. Online media were used by activists as sites of resistance and collective memory during this period.

Nkululeko Sibanda, an activist and Ndebele sent out an email protesting the training camp in Zimbabwe saying:

The relationship between Zimbabwe and North Korean was cemented by the blood of our kin. Symbolically, this is the best chance in more than 20 years we have had to defend our dead and our blood.\textsuperscript{15}

Zapu spokesman, Methuseli Moyo quipped:

In as much as Zimbabwe desperately needs to be part of the FIFA 2010 South Africa showcase, ZAPU feels hosting the national team of a country associated more with the emotive and evil Gukurahundi exercise, than for its footballing reputation, has nothing to do with tourism.

It is simply a glorification of Gukurahundi, and an act of provocation to the victims of the military operation against unarmed, defenceless and innocent Ndebeles... They are not welcome at all in Zimbabwe.

The precise reason is captured by a comment from Brilliant Mhlanga who asserted thus: “We cannot allow them to train and merry-make in our environment when the scar caused by the genocide continues to bleed to this day.” This comment insinuates that there has not been healing since the scar “continues to bleed to this day,” some 30 years after independence.

\textsuperscript{13} Minister arrested over Gukurahundi memorial. Available at http://www.newzimbabwe.com/news-4919-Gukurahundi%20minister%20arrested/news.aspx (Date retrieved : 07/11/11)
\textsuperscript{14} North Korea team not welcome: activists. Available at http://www.newzimbabwe.com/news-2198-Bulawayo%20NO%20to%20North%20Korea%20team/news.aspx (Date retrieved : 07/11/11)
\textsuperscript{15} North Korea team not welcome: activists. Available at http://www.newzimbabwe.com/news-2198-Bulawayo%20NO%20to%20North%20Korea%20team/news.aspx (Date retrieved : 07/11/11)
The debates on genocide also encompass issues that have to do with justice and a need to address and find finality to the issue. A story from the website gleaned from the WikiLeaks, an expose on the US diplomatic cables about Zimbabwe on one former commanders of the army, Perence Shiri, during the atrocities reveals this.\[16\] Perence Shiri, the cable claims, had repented of the role he played during the genocide. The readers feel there is a way in which his remorse could be shown besides information from a leaked cable. A comment from *Umfundisi* reveals this:

> Mr Shiri repentence demands confession. Prove yourself, stand up and own up. If you were brave enough to do the crime be brave enough to stand up and face the people you wronged and ask for forgiveness. Don't do it from the office, but come down to us, face us, plead with us. Come let us resean together. Woza ndoda sikhulume (Translated from IsiNdebele: *Come man let's talk*). Woza (Come). (sic)

In addition, readers try to offer two solutions and these are to allow for repentance/dialogue or to punish the genocide architects and participants. *Joe Rug*, a reader suggests a solution and comments thus:

> He deserves to die & nothing more..This guys has blood on his hands just like his master. A bullet in his head will justify the role he played in Gukurahundi massacres. The hour is at hand. Wait & see. Libya is a good lesson for all to see but these myopic minded politicians pretend they are in a world of their own. Such arrogance will do you no good. You are digging your own graves & the happiest hour. (sic)

And *Kulwant* adds another solution that he wishes may be considered:

> The only way our country can move forward is having people like these who reform and regret their past deeds and move on with times. I wish the rest will follow suit and Zimbabwe will once again be a nation for all Zimbabweans. (sic)

*Mokoena* believes that repentance has to be shown to the people who were affected:

> Yes every man is capable of repentance Shiri included. What we wait to see is Shiri's deeds to the people of the Midlands and Matebeleland not only to Dabengwa and we need to hear from his own mouth ukuthi (that) he has repented. That includes him telling us who gave the orders, who killed who yonke lenyakanyaka (everything that happened) (sic).

It is clear from above that this taboo topic is easily engaged with using not only pseudonyms but also in sheer honesty as people know that they are safe from legal or extralegal repercussions that would have followed were the issue discussed in the open within Zimbabwe. The contributions clearly speak to the need for dialogue.

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about the genocide so that there will be closure on the issue and have the country “move forward” (Kulwant, 2011). Another suggested solution is coming out in the open, through a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and addressing the past as happened in Rwanda and South Africa to quote examples closer to Zimbabwe.

The fact that Gukurahundi and the post-colonial subjugation of the people of Matabeleland seems to be continuing even after the 1987 unity accord has implications on how history is variously engaged with and forms pivotal parts of the people’s collective memory. Again memory cannot be easily escaped as Ananda Mitra17 (2001) argues that alternative online media give readers a voice to memorialise, a voice that authority cannot afford to ignore. Events worldwide have shown that new media are used by subaltern elements in society to challenge authority. The government has not come up with mechanisms to address this historical injustice; criminalizing any debates about it, a symbolic act of suppressing, erasure and denial of right to memory.

Conclusion

From the two examples of debating the taboo it is clear that people can now use the internet as ‘prosumers’ of information. Their status as ‘prosumers’ gives them freedom, power and a voice to speak up to authority and generate content. The internet offers an alternative digital public sphere where ordinary citizens meet and discuss issues they would not ordinarily discuss in government controlled public spheres because regimes of control have made discussions of these taboo topics impossible. In addition, the fact that public media stifle vibrant debate that speaks against state programmes, means people will forever be in the dark. To circumvent this, the internet, as a forum for power, voice and self-expression, has made it possible for debate and tensions between the elite and ordinary people to be experienced in a typical Habermasian public sphere fashion online. This article has explored these ‘taboo’ debates through the lenses of new media. It has used news articles and reader comments as a way of understanding and showing that the internet has given people an opportunity and avenue to offer counter-hegemonic narratives from below and not only be consumers of discourses from above. The article has also argued that even though it is taboo to discuss certain issues in the Zimbabwean politics, the internet has helped create a forum for intellectualization, conceptualization and discussion of these without fear of legal or extralegal ramifications.