

communication structures are heavily tilted toward mainstream discourses, oppositional forces and reformists often resort to alternative media, hence creating an alternative public sphere. As Woo-Young (2005) has argued, an alternative public sphere is a space in which counterdiscourse is produced and consumed by counterpublics, who had their expression or voices suppressed by the existing social order. Since the alternative media are not controlled by government, they arguably revitalize the political public sphere by giving access to oppositional and social movements that could not easily access the formal public sphere.

The Media and Democratization

The wave of democratization that swept across sub-Saharan Africa in the late 1980s and early 1990s is one of the consequences of globalization. The end of the Cold War marked the beginning of a new global political order and open demands for democracy—fundamental human rights, multipartism, and greater representation. The confluence of internal and external pressures led to unprecedented political transformations in Africa, and these have been described by Huntington (1991) as a “third wave of democratization.” The basic tenets of this liberal dispensation emphasize an introduction of extensive competition among individuals and organized groups (especially political parties) for political power. The media have been identified as crucial elements in the process of building, consolidating, and nurturing a democratic society. Democratization thus envisages an expansion of communicative democratic spaces.

A study of democratization processes is inevitable a study of access to communicative spaces. The media’s role in the democratization process resolves around their relation to wider structures and systems of power contestation. The linkage invites a reconsideration of the relative power of media in relation to organized communication structures and systems of power contestation. However, in authoritarian societies, or during periods of conflict, there is an inclination by the powerful sectors toward controlling the communicative spaces. Therefore, the role of the media has to be assessed in relation to freedom of expression, that is, the ability for citizens to participate in political discussions and safely express their political convictions by voting for a party of their choice without fear of reprisals. Ideally, the media should provide communicative spaces where people can openly participate in discussion and debates. The metaphor of space defines the social, political, and physical configurations in which positions of power, domination, and marginality are negotiated and reproduced (Barnett, 2003). However, in authoritarian societies, or during periods of conflict, there is an inclination by the powerful sectors toward controlling the communicative spaces. Therefore,

While modern politics in Western countries has been largely mediated through the mainstream media and more recently through the Internet, in the sub-Saharan countries, the situation is different. Many critics would dispute the existence in Africa of a Habermasian public sphere—that communicative space in which private people come together as a public. Nonetheless, African media are central to political processes in Africa even though they are not as widespread as in Western countries. The media in Africa provide mediating mechanisms for political representation, despite their being limited to urban areas. In countries still in democratic transition, given greater political freedom and a responsive public, the role of the media is crucial in educating the people about the different political parties and candidates available for choice (Randall, 1999).

Individuals and institutions vying for power also contend to influence the media in terms of representation, access, and participation. Political entities compete for media space and strategically mobilize forms of communicative power. The media in a democracy constitute prime areas for contending interests, values, and viewpoints—in pursuits of public recognition, legitimacy, and strategic aims. As McNair (2000) argues, any study of democracy in contemporary conditions is a study of how the media report and interpret political events and issues (p. x).

political crisis unfolding in the country. The crisis affected the communicative spaces in several ways. Firstly, the increasingly authoritarian government responded to domestic and international pressure by protecting its own information spaces and, secondly, by also attempting to influence the media impact outside its own borders. The response can also be interpreted in light of government's efforts to reinforce sovereignty in the face of what has been defined as unwarranted interference in the national affairs by the former colonial power, the United Kingdom, the European Union, and the United States. Control of media space within the national boundaries can be seen as competition to dominate national consciousness and reinforce patriotism.

Faced by multifaceted problems, the government fundamentally shifted the communication spaces. It did so by emasculating the mainstream national media, attempting to influence public opinion in its own favor by directing the state-owned newspaper oligopoly to serve out government propaganda; by regulating the reception of international media in the country; and by restricting external communication channels. The government also developed media policies that undermine the growth of the media and their possible extension to new areas, creating an environment of insecurity that scares away local investors, and put up stringent conditions that effectively discourage foreign investment and limit access to the media.

Control of the media extends through ownership structure and by means of legal and extralegal measures. The ownership structure of the media gives the government dual control over the country's largest print media and only broadcasting institution. In the broadcasting media, the government has, since 1980, kept the broadcasting sector firmly under control with a stringent monopoly situation, notwithstanding pressures for liberalization in the 1990s. Even though broadcasting reforms saw the enactment of a new broadcasting law that theoretically promoted a three-tier broadcasting system, in practice a status quo of monopoly prevailed. In the

from a Gramscian perspective, the media have to be interpreted as instruments for disseminating and reinforcing the hegemonic perspective.

Contested Communicative Spaces

The political landscape in Zimbabwe has, since independence in 1980, been dominated by one political party, ZANU-PF, led by President Robert Mugabe. Through the years, the party has extended its hegemony into the economic, social, and cultural spheres, including the mass media, where the government controls the only broadcasting institution and the nominally public-owned Zimbabwe Newspapers Group. However, toward the end of the 1990s, there has been a growing discontent over limited political participation, human rights violations, the declining economy, and limited communication platforms. This discontent against the ruling party saw the formation of a new opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), backed by important groups in the civil society and supported by Western countries. Another development was the formation of an independent daily newspaper, *The Daily News*, to give voice to oppositional discourses. The *Daily News* made an enormous contribution by opening up political communication spaces in the country and provided access to alternative interpretations of unfolding events. Within a short space of time, its readership became the largest in the country, thus challenging the ruling party's hegemony in the national political public sphere.

The controversial land reforms in which the government violently confiscated white-owned commercial farms in the late 1990s, the disputed Parliamentary elections in 2000, and the presidential elections in 2002 are all events that ignited a multifaceted crisis and have been centers of contestation in the communicative spaces. The deepening conflict in Zimbabwe dichotomized the political public sphere, with contending groups adopting polarized views on the

The government policies and actions have also sought to suppress the development of community media. Attempts have also been made by the government to delink the rural areas from the urban areas through the use of "coerced" traditional leaders who have monitoring powers over their communities and have powers to expel noncompliant residents. Residents supporting other political parties, other than the ruling party, have been denied access to basic materials such as food aid, fertilizers, and farming equipment.¹ It is also illegal to say something that undermines the authority of the president. A number of people have been hauled into court for uttering "subversive" comments on the president. People in small communities are therefore not free to express their political opinions. Fear of repercussions undoubtedly undermines freedom of expression in the country, so that "word-of-mouth" communication, one of the most important channels of communication in rural areas.

Developments in grassroots communication have also been hampered by the repressive censored texts within which the media in the whole country operate and the cumulative self-censorship that prevails in the country. Not only has the government dominated the media landscape, it has also tried to control and manipulate indigenous communication systems such as music, theater, and religious performances. Artists, especially musicians considered too critical of the government, have had their music banned on the airwaves, and some have been forced into self-censorship or exile. These include Thomas Mapfumo, who is currently living in exile in the United States. Theater groups such as Amakhozi Theatre Productions and Roofop Productions have had their plays banned due to their critical political content. Police have banned the performance of three satirical plays from Amakhozi—*The Good President*, *Everyday Soldier*, and *Overthrown*—banned Roofop's play *Super Patriots and Morons*. This shows the government's determination to control both the written and the oral public sphere. There are other artists who have dedicated

print media sector, the government through a public trust has, since independence, controlled a large stake in the print media, controlling the main daily and weekly newspapers, with only a few independent weeklies working on the fringes, targeting mainly the urban elite. The dual control of the print and broadcasting media has ensured that access to the mainstream media is mainly given to the dominant discourses, while alternative discourses are subdued.

Legal measures have been used to close down at least five independent newspapers, including the country's main independent daily newspaper *The Daily News*. The laws have been roundly condemned by the international community. The legislative environment that gives the authorities unlimited powers to license newspapers and to subsequently close them has been used to curtail freedom of expression in the country, so that only the dominant voices are heard in the official media. On the pretext of protecting individual dignity, privacy, reputation, national security, and public order, laws that have been promulgated cumulatively limit access to the political public sphere and limit the voices that can be heard, by limiting the channels that can be used. Extralegal activities, such as arrests and harassment by security forces, have also been applied to instill fear, compliance, and self-censorship among journalists. Consequently, a number of journalists have since left the country. It has also been alleged that the Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) has taken over some independent newspapers. The newspapers in question include the Zimbabwe Mirror Newspapers Group, which publishes the *Daily Mirror*, the *Daily Mirror on Saturday*, and the *Sunday Mirror*. The chief executive officer of the group was ousted through a boardroom coup. Another independent weekly newspaper, the *Financial Gazette*, has also been linked to the CIO takeover. The owner of two other independent weeklies, *The Zimbabwe Independent* and *The Zimbabwe Standard*, has repeatedly been harassed by the authorities, who at one point questioned his citizenship status.

their works toward challenging the status quo. As one radical musician, Sam Farai Monro has vowed that “the government is manipulating the arts and culture for propaganda to brainwash the nation, and we are coming in to challenge that and liberate our people’s mental perceptions of reality” (Shumba, 2007). Some artists have even formed a protest arts movement to challenge the government’s restrictions on artistic expressions (see, e.g., www.voicefromzimbabwe.com).

The cumulative effects of the legal and extralegal measures of control have turned the media into both crucial settings and tools for power struggles. Freedom of expression is curtailed with impunity, and communicative spaces have shrunk as a result of the government’s concerted policy of shutting down all avenues of access to the public sphere. Alternative discourses are silenced, marginalized, and isolated.

Alternative Media as Communicative Spaces

As would be expected in any environment where there is little or no access to mainstream media, social movements and local communities turn to alternative communicative spaces independent of government control. As Nyamfjoh (2005) has argued,

However repressive a government is and how ever profound the spiral of silence induced by standardized global media menus, few people are ever completely mystified or wholly duped. In other words, there is always room—sometimes through radical or alternative media. (p. 204)

The restricted communicative space in Zimbabwe has generated an array of alternative media and alternative public spheres. Political reformists are turning to the ICTs (information and communication technologies), especially the Internet and radio stations hosted in foreign countries for remedies, while some communities are riveted to indigenous communication systems,

especially the word of mouth, oral literature, theater, festivals, and metaphysical forms in their endeavor to air their views—not without risks, though, as already pointed out above.

Radio is the most-used medium in Zimbabwe, as it is limited by factors such as newspapers, its limited by factors such as illiteracy, costs, and distribution and access patterns. Radio can thus be described as the most powerful and strategic mass medium in the country, and this explains why the government has been reluctant to liberalize the radio sector. People in the villages have access only to government-owned radio stations. This gives the incumbent ruling party unlimited access to the majority of the population, hence a competitive advantage over other political parties also seeking rural votes.

Disgruntled by the lack of access to mainstream radio, prodemocracy movements have turned to alternative radio stations, mostly with the support of Western governments advocating for regime change in Zimbabwe. Alternative radio stations, referred to as clandestine radio by Nichols and Soley (1987), are defined as “unlicensed radio stations designed to create political change within countries targeted by their transmission” (Zeller, n.d.). These stations often appear in countries experiencing political crisis and where opposition forces have limited access to mainstream broadcasting media. Prodemocracy movements, aware of the strategic importance of the medium in reaching the masses, have thus turned to alternative radio stations. The primary goal is advocating for political change and offering alternative explanations to the crisis in the country.

There are today three alternative radio stations relying on foreign transmission facilities and the Internet, and these are SW Radio Africa, Voice of the People (Radio VOP), and Voice of America’s Studio 7. The stated objective for starting these radio stations is the endeavor to provide

Zimbabweans with alternative radio channels and provide news and perspectives that are silent in the government-owned radio programming. These radio stations target the grassroots population in Zimbabwe, using all the three main languages, English, Shona, and Ndebele.

SW Radio Africa is based in the United Kingdom, and its stated objective is to be the voice of the voiceless, giving its audience opportunities to call in and air their firsthand experiences of the situation in Zimbabwe. It also allows readers of its Web site opportunities to participate through discussion forums. SW Radio Africa's Web site includes links to major prodemocracy groups in Zimbabwe. SW Radio Africa has broadcast every day via shortwave and Web radio, and in December, 2006, it introduced an SMS service where it sends news headlines to mobile telephone subscribers in the country. The initiative followed reports that the security agents were confiscating shortwave radios from listeners in an effort to prevent people from accessing alternative radio broadcasts. Several NGOs have also been distributing solar-powered radio receivers in remote rural areas so as to enable people to access shortwave broadcasts from alternative radio stations. The government has, on several occasions jammed shortwave broadcasts from SW Radio Africa and other alternative broadcasters.

Radio VOP was established in 2000 as an alternative voice for Zimbabweans in the run-up to that year's parliamentary elections and is broadcast in shortwave 1 hour everyday. Its stated objectives are "to cover issues that would not make it to the state controlled electronic media" and to give Zimbabweans an opportunity to look at issues critically. Programs are produced by journalists based in the country and then shipped or e-mailed to the Netherlands for transmission via Radio Netherlands' relay transmitters in Madagascar. Radio VOP promotes the works of prodemocracy organizations such as Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights, National Constitutional Assembly, Zimbabwe Electoral Support Network, and many others. For this,

Radio VOP has been a target of harassment by government through raids, arrests, jamming, and seizure of equipment and office files. In August 2002, the offices of Radio VOP in Harare were destroyed in a bomb blast, and the assailants have never been caught. But the motives for bombing the offices were clear—to silence and intimidate journalists working for the station. Its directors were, between December 2005 and January 2006, arrested and charged with operating a radio station without a license, but the case against them failed, since they operate a "communication trust" rather than a radio station.

Voice of America Studio 7 is another radio initiative based in foreign countries. Studio 7 is a radio news channel launched by the Voice of America in 2003, and it is manned by exiled Zimbabwean journalists based in the United States. It features interviews and commentary on social, political, and economic matters. The government has repeatedly accused the U.S. government of sponsoring a hostile radio station.

Another ingenious alternative radio is the Radio Dialogue project. Radio Dialogue is a community radio program whose original aim was to have a community broadcasting license for Bulawayo and its surrounding. As the name implies, it intended to create a forum for debate and information on economic, political, social, cultural, and developmental issues. Radio Dialogue has embarked on a project of diffusing community views by other methods, which do not rely on radio transmission technology. These methods include road shows in which the communities, local artists, and musicians participate in artistic works such as dancing, singing, talks, workshops, and meetings to plan advocacy issues around democracy, the rule of law and human rights, and discussion forums in schools. These programs are recorded in audio and video cassettes and then distributed to the community. Radio Dialogue's stated aims are that it should be available, accessible, and affordable to the community it serves. It is the community's own means of communication and a platform for everyone to express themselves.

The popularity of these Web sites is evidenced through the ratings they get. In 2005, New Zimbabwe.com was rated by the U.S.-based Alexa Web Search as the most popular Web site in Zimbabwe, scoring higher than the country's largest daily newspaper, *The Herald*. Johwa (2007) has noted that "with draconian media laws continuing to throttle the life of publishing and broadcasting in Zimbabwe, these online agencies have become an increasingly important source of alternative information for many Zimbabweans who can access them." The popularity of the news sites is also due to the fact that a quarter of Zimbabwe's 12 million people live in foreign countries, where access to the Internet is better than in Zimbabwe. The news sites are linked and sometimes financed by various social movements and NGOs, have other priorities than making money, and are sympathetic to certain factions in Zimbabwe's fragmented politics. Sometimes there is animosity between news sites.

The government's reaction to these online publications has been milder than its reaction to other publications. This might be due to the fact that these news sites target groups other than the ruling party's grassroots supporters, that they are hosted outside the reach of its draconian national media laws, and that most of the articles are published under pseudonyms. The regime is, however, eager to control the news sites, which it claims are sponsored by foreign interests bent on effecting regime change in the country. Journalists and individuals have also been warned against contributing stories to foreign-hosted news sites. A new law, the Interception of Communications Bill, will allow the government to monitor e-mails and other communications through Internet service providers.

The prevalence of online newspapers actively engaged in political commentary is indicative of the liberating function played by new technologies for prodemocracy movements contesting established structural constraints. The new technologies, especially the Internet, stand today as mobilizing tools both socially and politically in

The alternative radio stations are clearly an endeavor to democratize the political public sphere in Zimbabwe, and they provide alternative discursive spaces for marginalized voices.

The Internet and New Media Spaces

The repressive media environment in Zimbabwe has ignited the rapid growth of political news Web sites hosted in foreign domains, mainly South Africa, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The aim of these news sites is to provide access to those who otherwise would not have such access in the Zimbabwean media. These include protests groups, "dissidents," trade unions, and opposition parties. The Web sites are driven by a focused political agenda aimed at democratic reforms in Zimbabwe. Today, there are more than 12 Zimbabwe-focused news sites.² Almost all the news sites describe and perceive themselves as alternative spaces of communication and information for Zimbabweans. Their intention is thus to expand the shrinking communicative space.

For example, New Zimbabwe.com describes itself as "a vehicle for mass participation" motivated by a belief that "every Zimbabwean and every African with a voice deserves to be heard—including those who have forfeited the freedoms of the majority" (www.newzimbabwe.com/pages/us1.html). The Web site claims to be driven by freedom of expression, hence its being open to those suppressing freedom of expression in Zimbabwe. Another news site, ZWNNews.com, is also concerned with social issues such as politics, human rights, and the economy. ZimOnline describes itself as an alternative medium seeking to expand the democratic space being shrunk by repressive media laws in Zimbabwe. It further describes itself as being independent of any political party, neither civic organization nor any lobby group. Zimdaily.com describes itself in almost the same language as other news sites. Some of these news sites are linked to radio stations described above.

effectiveness of alternative media as communicative spaces in Zimbabwe.

First, the alternative media movement is created mostly by self-exiled journalists, refugees, expatriates, academics, students, and experts based outside Zimbabwe, mostly in South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States. This group effectively uses news sites to catch up with the latest news from home and seeks to influence political discourse. The ruling elites perceive this group as comprising potential supporters of the opposition movement. Therefore, despite their capacity to generate political discussion, the government has made sure that little of these discussions reach the grass roots in Zimbabwe by, for example, jamming the radio frequencies, confiscating radio receivers, criminalizing comments critical of the president—primarily to dissuade rumor mongering and word of mouth. In that way, there is a disjuncture between a highly engaged political movement based abroad and a less-informed majority residing within the country. The state machinery has drastically disempowered the diaspora through disenfranchisement.

Second, the prevailing economic situation shapes the spread of the Internet in the country. The International Telecommunication Union figures of 2005 show that the Internet penetration rate is 6.7%. While a significant number of Zimbabweans can access the Internet from Internet cafés, prices are beyond the reach of many. This implies that the Internet public sphere is an exclusionary and elitist public sphere. The promise of the Internet as a domain for an alternative public sphere fostering debate and information exchange is lost when conversations are limited to the few who can afford the costs. This lack of access to alternative media hampers the advocacy work and mobilization by social movements whose target group is the majority within the country.

Third, the alternative media with reformist agendas often tend to be elitist. Studies of the U.K. activists' newspaper *SchNews* have shown that while at first glance the paper appears to privilege "ordinary" voices, closer examination reveals a "counter-elite" (Bolton, 2006). While no systematic study has been carried out on Zimbabwe-focused

Zimbabwe, and they offer linkages to fragmented and dispersed dissenting voices.

An Alternative Public Sphere

The Gramscian notion of counterhegemony is discernable in these alternative media. The absence of an accessible public sphere, as a space where the people can come together and participate in inclusive political discussions, gave rise to an alternative realm of political debate. With the mainstream media controlled and dominated by government, the alternative media constitute alternative communicative spaces independent of the cohesive apparatus of the state and are thus positioned to challenge the dominant sociopolitical order. The alternative media offer platforms for political advocacy to democracy activists and the transnationally integrated prodemocracy social movements.

The democratic potential of alternative media is, however, not without shortcomings. Alternative media are so often hailed as having the potential to enhance democracy and citizenship (Bolton, 2006). They provide platforms for the marginalized groups who do not see their interests and concerns reflected in the mainstream media. New communication technologies, especially the Internet, have created opportunities for the establishment of a counterpublic sphere, revitalizing citizen-based democracy on the basis of access, participation, and pluralism. The potential of the Internet arises in its capability to host new spaces for distribution of content and discussion. Characteristics of interactivity and anonymity enable many to be heard without fear of victimization or reprisals.

However, the optimism generated by the upsurge of new political communicative spaces ought not to ignore other factors militating against this view. Bolton (2006) argues that while the Internet does provide a space for more participation, the social distribution of cultural capital or know-how discriminates against full participation online. There are a number of social, political, and cultural factors that limit the

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1. See *The Politics of Food Assistance in Zimbabwe on the Human Rights Watch* Web site: www.hrw.org/backgrounder/africa/zimbabwe/2004/5.htm

2. www.newzimbabwe.com, www.zimdaily.com, www.zwnews.com, www.zimonline.co.za, www.thezimbabwean.co.uk, www.zimbabwewestituation.com, www.thezimbabweatimes.com, www.zimobserver.com, www.zimbabwepost.com, www.changezimbabwe.com, www.zimbabwejournalists.com, www.studi07news.com, www.zimbabwejournalists.com, www.voanews.com/english/africa/zimbabwe/, www.swradioafrica.com, and www.vopradio.co.zw

Notes

1. See *The Politics of Food Assistance in Zimbabwe on the Human Rights Watch* Web site: www.hrw.org/backgrounder/africa/zimbabwe/2004/5.htm

2. www.newzimbabwe.com, www.zimdaily.com, www.zwnews.com, www.zimonline.co.za, www.thezimbabwean.co.uk, www.zimbabwewestituation.com, www.thezimbabweatimes.com, www.zimobserver.com, www.zimbabwepost.com, www.changezimbabwe.com, www.zimbabwejournalists.com, www.studi07news.com, www.zimbabwejournalists.com, www.voanews.com/english/africa/zimbabwe/, www.swradioafrica.com, and www.vopradio.co.zw

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