Citizen blogging in Zimbabwe took a wild and vibrant turn during the country’s recent presidential and parliamentary elections. Diverse articles randomly posted from different corners of the country flooded the internet leaving the government in dismay. On 29 March 2008 the voting exercise in Zimbabwe attracted huge coverage across the globe for various reasons. However, all excitement was drained when Zimbabwe Electoral Commission took a month to announce the much-awaited results and issued unsatisfactory explanations for the delay. Zanu-PF deliberately remained tight-lipped while mainstream media a presented a country at ease yet, in actual fact there, was an irate, information-hungry society demanding answers. Meanwhile ordinary citizens were at work, blogging and filling in the information gap. Bloggers mobilised other citizens and the world to demand the election results. A new communication era had dawned in Zimbabwe.

By Nothando Nhlovu

Information dissemination in Zimbabwe has always been centralised by the government with mainstream news sources being the politicians themselves. The government is in charge of most of the media operating in the country. In fact, to practise journalism in Zimbabwe, one has to be registered with the Media Information Council (MIC). Established under the infamous Access to Information Protection of Privacy Act of 2000, the council often bars the country’s private and foreign media organisations from covering any events in the country because they find them to be biased and therefore branding Zimbabwe negatively. In the conclusion of its Article 19 paper, the Media Institute of Southern Africa – Zimbabwe (MISA-Zimbabwe) stated that such a law “undermining freedom of expression in Zimbabwe, promoting government control over even the independent media and giving repressive elements tools of intimidation”. Because of its undemocratic behaviour, Zimbabwe has been at the bottom in press freedom rankings for the past four years.

A struggle for information dissemination was actively raging between the state and other media. While the government accused the private press of not being patriotic by working in cahoots with the West, its former colonisers, the press accused the government of failing to deliver the promises it had made since 1980. The Daily News, an independent national daily, was bombed in April of 2000 and again in 2001 and then banned in 2004. According to Hill (2005:92) the Daily News is to be credited with the MDC’s success in the 2002 elections. A string of other papers such as the Daily News, Zimbabwe’s mainstream media has always shied away from such brazen reporting. While it is argued that the internet carries democratic potential as it empowers citizens to discuss topical issues, McNair (2006: 2) points out that easy access to the internet has resulted in “unplanned outcomes in media content that are sometimes different or opposite from the official. The wide ranges of news coverage have led to ideological competition and an increased volatility of news agendas”.

While blogs seemed to lack any reserve towards the government, consumers also develop a disregard for traditional media dismissing it as propaganda in Zimbabwe. A conflict between bloggers and the government was therefore inevitable. Reports claimed the Zimbabwean government was carrying out a witch-hunt to snuff out bloggers. It openly discouraged government unsanctioned online news provision by threatening people with the Interception of Communications Act (ICA). The act demands that operators of telecommunications services are compelled to install software and hardware to enable them to intercept and store information as directed by the state. In spite of this seemingly harsh laws, the flow of information out of the country is made easy by pervasive technology. The internet is self-governed and has generated content is no doubt a threat to mainstream media they could be easily located, to locate those posting stories opposing the government. The government dismissed it as propaganda in Zimbabwe. A conflict between citizens and bloggers is a battle for the information dissemination in the country, as it has always been centralised by the government. The government has been the main source of information in Zimbabwe, and this has created a gap. Bloggers mobilised other citizens and the world to demand the election results. A new communication era had dawned in Zimbabwe.
Bloggers: The New Watchdogs on the Zimbabwe Block

Content

According to Burnett and Marshall (2003:165) the advantage of news provision from blogs is that individuals provide “tremendous insights for users to understand how major events have affected people close to the event, unmediated by the gate-keeping structures of contemporary television networks and news magazines”. When mainstream media failed to operate at their maximum in an eventful period such as the 2008 presidential elections, blogs proved themselves ideal for sharing information in the complex political situation. Immediately after political rallies took place posts on the events would be made available to the public. Through blogs, Zimbabwe’s recent elections have been discussed in detail to the government’s ire.

A browse though most blogs indicates that both mainstream media and bloggers use each other as news sources. The relationship between bloggers and journalists is symbiotic but the credibility of blogs is often questioned because most bloggers are not professionals. How credible is an article posted by a farmer or a high school child with access to internet at home? Are they even aware of media ethics and laws? Such questions have come up in debates. But there is no doubt that blogging is providing diverse fresh voices and contributing significant observations on the political front.

Bloggers have enthusiastically taken on such media roles such as monitoring, expanded people’s access to information and opened up public debate in a manner that traditional media have failed to do because of government interference.

The internet has opened up the media to new voices which provide people with different interpretations of events. They have managed to draw interest to a range of issues that required political attention in Zimbabwe.

New watchdogs on the block

In addition to being watchdogs of the state blogs are also policing mainstream media, pointing out their misrepresentations and omissions. According to Banda (2006: 1) it is no coincidence that alternative media “emerge to deal with specific ideological projects and as such must be viewed as satisfying a specific need at a specific point in time”. Zimbabwean blogging is an outlet for those whose voices have not been heard in the past. It is a form of emancipation for the marginalised whose opinions are not in line with mainstream editorial policies. What was never considered newsworthy in mainstream news is now of priority concern to citizens and the effect is that mainstream media is now tagging along.

Blogs across the globe have been observed as transforming politics, and shifting ideologies. Hackett and Carroll (2006: 20) define ideology as the power to shape the very perceptions and desires of subordinate groups so they do not think to challenge existing social relations. The dominant Zanu-PF ideology is being challenged constantly. Forms of resistance towards policies seen as unfair or promoting inequality have been built by citizens challenging them through their blogs.

One may conclude that despite still being for the elite, technological culture has taken centre stage in the politics of news production and dissemination in Zimbabwe. Blogs have not only broadened the means of discussing national matters but they have also changed the way mainstream media organisations report stories.

References