One are the days when people need to invest a lot of money to acquire the means of mental production to mass self-communicate and circulate alternative discourses; with the aid of social media platforms, ordinary people have been ushered into the digital agora. Nowadays, “journalism by the people and for the people” is freely available and circulating public spheres worldwide. Social journalism as a genre is based on the motto, “all news is social”, while questioning the hierarchical and authoritative mode of news production associated with traditional journalism.

It signals a shift from a “focus on individual intelligence, where expertise and authority are located in individuals and institutions, to a focus on collective intelligence where expertise and authority are distributed and networked” (Hermida, 2012).

The art of storytelling which consists of sharing ideas, facts and persuading others is intricately linked to traditional journalism where journalists/producers want to reach their audience, persuade their readers, and connect with their followers.

What distinguishes traditional journalism as a form of storytelling from the mediated newer forms, known as social journalism, is the close affinity of social journalism to the African art forms such as oramedia and radio trottoir (pavement radio). In Africa, storytelling has always been at the heart of human communication. Ugbogah (1985) defined oramedia as media that “are grounded on indigenous culture produced and consumed by members of a group” (Ugbogah, 1985: 32). Radio trottoir is French for pavement radio, and was popularised by Stephen
issues which are unrepresented in most qualitatively not be likened to rumour about their day to day activities, they may be acknowledged by journalists and in bars, at taxi ranks and, while these stories reinforce the wishes in the public sphere (Ellis & Ter Haar 2005). These stories are rooted in African oral traditions. They are rumours of the masses, bear association with their everyday life. Identities along ethnic, religious, geographical location, football fandom and political affiliations are reproduced by which social relationships and a world view are maintained and defined.

Of particular importance in these online communities is that storytelling is deeply rooted in shared values and interests of community members. They adopt languages and idioms which speak to the common person and bear association with their everyday life. Identities along ethnic, religious, geographical location, football fandom and political affiliations are reproduced in online communities and are vigorously policed through administrators and fellow group members.

While these are unofficial stories circulating in oral exchanges as people go about their day to day activities, they may qualitatively not be likened to rumour per se, as they are often representative of issues which are unrepresented in most news media, such as moral censorship of political figures, or unofficial reports on the whereabouts of the country’s president. Those who tell the stories that comprise oramedia arrange their texts as they please, often adding new twists to a well-known plot. Storytelling was therefore an art, or a skill for which the storyteller was revered.

From the foregoing, it may be argued that social journalism, notions of radio trottoir and oramedia do indeed bear resonances in their manifestations. Social journalism therefore, is not a new phenomenon in Africa; per se. Rather it signals the migration of the human voice from offline to online spaces. Through its encompassment of a number of oral arts including prose, poetry and drama, where the village conversed as collective community in the cool shade of the sacred baobab or mango trees, or media bears parallel traits with how social media brings together a community of like-minded people through live chats or wall postings in virtual communities. Virtual communities also serve as the sounding boards where notices are posted about new developments taking place back home for members of the diasporic community.

Aspects of “community” are evident in virtual communities mushrooming on social network sites where like-minded groups form online communities who share knowledge, companionship and advice in different aspects of life. For example, online groups may be formed around collective rallying points which include discussions and support on health issues, online relationships, diasporic communities attempting to reconnect with their ethnic communities, supporters’ football clubs as well as fundraising clubs, to name but a few. A cursory view of some popular Zimbabwean virtual communities on Facebook include Dungamurua Chete, True FC Banga Cales Only Zim Edition, Nobele Mhaukazi, Wezihra paFacebook and Samunyika paFacebook, where particular cultural features are strictly conventioned, by which social relationships and a world view are maintained and defined.

What stories are being told?
Our recent travels around Africa have enlightened us to the use of social media in different African contexts. Stories which are being circulated are varied, including political, economic, social issues and event-based content, and tend to circulate cyclically from the offline to the online and vice versa. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there is rich debate circulating on social network sites especially amongst subaltern citizens. As a result the alternative public sphere is filled with a great outpouring of personal stories and experiences.

In Malawi, we learnt that journalists and activists are using social media to circulate alternative views on the country’s political and economic challenges. A case in point was the debate generated on social media platforms with hundreds of individuals airing their views. As far asfield as Mali, ordinary people have been discussing the Tuareg and Islamist rebels’ insurgency and military coup orchestrated by Captain Amadou Sanogo.

In Swaziland, the gift of the DC-9 aircraft to King Mswati at a time when the country is on the brink of an economic catastrophe has generated huge debate online among activists and ordinary people.

All these stories are evidence of the productive capacity of erstwhile news consumers grappling with everyday political issues in their different localities across the African continent. In order to avoid falling into the trap of diagnosing structural problems with biographical solutions, there is need to ensure that voices articulated online translate into meaningful citizen participation processes.

Storytelling and social journalism can serve as a critical starting point for journalists to become aware of important but unreported issues and events within different communities, and thereby provide a voice to the many hundreds of thousands who struggle in this regard. Perhaps this will do something in facilitating meaningful citizenship within post-colonial Africa.

References
