

Two days before the fall of Egypt's Hosni Mubarak my two friends and I were sitting in some lousy bar toying with some lousy beer and trying to ignore some equally lousy music. A conversation began between Noah (a medical doctor) and Amos (a businessman).

Noah: Just two weeks ago I declared that I would not join Facebook. But who knew that Facebook could topple a government? By coincidence my daughter bought me this iPhone in the US and now I can access Facebook on it.

Amos: Ah Facebook. What turned me off was when this young man, Hope, told me how he meets all these women on Facebook and goes all over Southern Africa to see them. Can you imagine your wife being on Facebook and talking to Hope?

I didn't need to make a contribution. Harare's stories come to you...

SOC MEDI

Before going into the question of how Zimbabweans use social media one needs to establish who uses it in the first place. What people forget in the whole hullabaloo about social media is the small word called ACCESS. Now access can be broken down into two main bits: AVAILABILITY and AFFORDABILITY. Is the technology available to the greatest number of people?

It is a given fact that Africans across the continent pay more than North Americans and Europeans for access to telephone, internet and mobile. The landlocked nature of Zimbabwe means that we suffer a double burden. The several optic-fibre cables that are being laid around the Western and Eastern shores of Africa land in places like Mtunzini (South Africa) and Mombasa (Kenya). Zimbabwe's tele-communications companies have to pay the costs of laying inland cables and of leasing bandwidth on these cables. When you throw in other factors such as the lack of competition (Econet versus a bankrupt NetOne), the upshot is that the Zimbabwean consumer gets a really bad deal.

Statistics on internet use in Zimbabwe are notoriously unreliable and figures of 10-15% of the adult population are tossed around. But what everyone seems to have in Zimbabwe is a mobile phone. At a recent workshop on citizen journalism for rural people only four out of 26 participants did not have cellphones but all knew how to use one. This, of course, is significant because the majority of Africans will access the internet for the first time in their lives on their mobile phones.

But for Zimbabweans it will be a while before the majority of users access internet on their mobile phones. The reasons are varied. A third-generation network is only available in Harare although the largest mobile company in the country is slowly beginning to roll this out to other cities. Unlike in the SA environment where handsets and contracts are easily obtainable, Zimbabweans have to pay upfront for smartphones. The result is all too visible: an archaic Nokia 3330 is a common sight. On the plus side the importation of cheap handsets from China and the Middle East means that gradually people will move to phones with more features.

In places like Harare many companies have set up wireless networks and one can access free internet at some of the prominent hotels. A couple of arts spaces offer internet access either for free or for a very small fee. Young people tend to patronise these places with their laptops. Econet's mobile internet service is also becoming popular but outside of Harare the connection is notoriously slow.

So what does the fraction of the population with internet access do? Sms, Facebook and e-mail are the major interactive tools Zimbabweans use and for three simple reasons:

I A I L D I A

- connecting with family;
- connecting with friends: the nature and size of the Zimbabwean diaspora means that there are various permutations in the way we use social media (almost exclusively Facebook);
- gaming.

The fourth reason that we all fantasise about is more an event: political mobilisation and advocacy. Studies have been done on how sms has been used in election monitoring, advocacy and political commentary but in Zimbabwe the use of text-messaging in this manner remains under-developed.

A Facebook revolution in Zimbabwe?

Given the so-called Spring Revolution in the Arab world, social media has moved from the margins to the mainstream in terms of people's consciousness. We should now brace ourselves for a myriad donor-funded projects that will be driven by the hope that the more people use social media, the more they can engage and mobilise against repressive regimes. There will be many disappointments with the results.

A technology cannot mobilise people all by itself. Zimbabwean society is not very well organised at the community level (the exception seems to be Matebeleland where I have a chance to work on a citizen journalism project with amazing potential). In being critical of Zimbabwe I am comparing with South Africa where there is strong local organisation and a clearly visible community leadership. Zimbabwe seems to me to be a society used to developing coping mechanisms. South Africans, however, react on the spot. Now what does that mean for social media use? Throw in Facebook and sms and hope the people will meet virtually and protest electricity cuts, non-collection of refuse and lack of clean water?

The new fixation with social media and its possibilities smacks of the same old modernisation paradigm. The strong belief that the mere introduction of technology will bring about certain effects. People are poor because they lack information and we give them information that having less children will sort out the issue of poverty. Sixty years of information has not brought water closer to villagers. But it is not all doom and gloom.

One Facebook group that fascinates me (more so because they speak to the world I grew up in) is called Dangamvura Chete. Let me describe the group and its kind of conversations to illustrate a few points.

The Dangamvura Chete group describes their township of origin in the Manicaland Province as follows:

Munezhu via Natvest (DANGAMVURA). A location we grew up in with all sorts of fun, full of rich entertaining incidences you can mention them to bring back the golden old days. Keep in touch and encourage as many ladies and gentlemen to join the group, bear in mind it's just a social engine to bring back childhood memories and laugh nechikwata pamhepo. If you have anything for as long as not political please feel free to communicate with the rest of the GROUP. Things like the popular pick pockets Tuturi, Andrew Kashiri, Shadhi Mapopo and a host of other funny characters male or female, it used to keep us occupied and alert every time we went to town or the shops in the evenings, but the truth is they never mugged anyone they know but quite capable of asking their fellow unknown colleagues to try their luck and later enjoy the loot together at a Braai stand kwaMunoz, Matongo or kwaTukuza. How organised n why not be organised as well as a group DANGAMVURA CHETE, home to all the Great and decent guys n pretty girls too. We stay too far from town and it encouraged us to be wiser and organised, God bless the Pool "Dangamvura and its people all over the world" This is a suburb located on the south eastern side of the railway line and surrounded by Rahin mountain now the Heroes acre and the Rocky Sheni mountain believed to have a passible underground gap (NINGA) to the other end of the mountain and Gimboki on the western end of the location, a place popularly known as a rifle range for shooting practice. A somehow land locked quiet suburb during our days before the population exploded may be because people were carrying out studies on how good the ' POOL' was. Now quite a big location and takes almost two or three hours to drive right round the sections. Blessed with nearly all churches found in the entire nation. Two good secondary schools and four primary schools but i think there have to be more schools now say double the current number to accommodate all the kids in one sitting. But of course I know there might be some private or church study groups taking another lot to educate the community and eradicate illiteracy. The construction of the link road was great and fantastic development and it cut the distance by three kilometres and a very big disadvantage to people in the other sections of the city, T and A in terms of transport, very few omnibuses ply that root. Socially it's quite a good place with pubs in nearly all sections of the city a culture quite popular with all city councils " a cow ready to milk" What lacks are sports fields, we need an Olympic size stadium, pool and any other facility you might think of fellow club members.

Who qualifies to be a member? Interestingly, the group is closed, meaning it is an invitation-only affair or that an administrator will have to "vet" and approve requests

for membership. Currently, there are 225 members in the network. Most of these members are now living outside both Dangamvura itself and Zimbabwe. What kind of conversations do they have? The group thrives on nostalgia. More importantly it brings people together and therefore fosters collective memory.

What normally happens is that someone asks a question and people begin to respond. It could be a question about the whereabouts of long-lost friends or an enquiry about what sort of change has taken place in the suburb. Members also post pictures. These pictures and wall posts are subject to key Facebook functions of "Like", "Comment", "Share" and "Subscribe" – this latter one allows members to get instant notifications from particular people posting in the group.

Below is an example of a conversation started by one member and the subsequent responses:

Morzies Mustapha Mukuhwa added this post: Was just thinking, we cud set up a Dangamvura Trust, which will look at some requirements of our Hood, Sporting Facilities, Health Club, HIV/AIDS Program, Children's Home, Old People etc. If we are game we can get inputs from those on the ground (i.e those still staying in D'vat), then we put a committee in place, then give a bit back to the community that made most of us who we are today. Can we discuss this? (This post had 17 comments)

Eddie Mlambo wrote: *It is a gr8t idea & a very sensitive 1. how are we going to meet obviously dis is not gonna b discussed on facebook & frm de luks of it we are all ova de wrld. We mst make it wrk mayb frm branches in different places.*

Houston Roberts wrote: *Way to go bro I want in... How can we all meet and form this group guys.. Moze, this is a good idea, lets give back to our community.. It made us who we are today by the way...*

Judith Gwarada wrote: *Let's try people good idea*

Conversation and connection

The example of the Dangamvura Chete group points to how Zimbabweans are using social media. Having gone through the trauma of dislocation, they tend to gravitate towards nostalgia (Zimbabwe was) and love re-connecting with people they went to school with. Families scattered across the globe announce university graduations, weddings, births, deaths etc on social media. Increasingly there is a sense of wanting to find a role in the rehabilitation of Zimbabwe.

The emphasis people make is on conversation and connecting. Anyone wanting to devise a strategy to engage with Zimbabweans on social and political issues will have to bear in mind that the top-down one-way broadcast model of communication is on its death bed. People want to be engaged – not to be preached to.

AND THE PEOPLE FORMERLY CALLED THE AUDIENCE.