

# BLOGGERS THE NEW WATCHDOGS ON THE ZIMBABWE BLOCK

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 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 Ndhlovu

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 was “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 *Weekly Times* have also been banned. Campbell (2003: 25) states that at this stage, the government-press relationship was at a critical point and “intimidation of the press was a clear indication that the government had lost the battle in relation to information warfare because the opposition had been able to successfully establish websites to counter government information”. While the government was able to deal with “unpatriotic” reporters working in the print industry because they could be easily located, to locate those posting stories on the internet proved a daunting task and at this point, user generated content is no doubt a threat to mainstream media and the government.

## Alternative media

According to Castells (2001: 184) it's often the case that the government and its citizens do not trust each other and, “the internet as a space of freedom, would epitomise this cleavage with advocates of liberty trying to preserve this new land of opportunity while government mobilises their considerable resources to close this leak in their control systems”.

Blogs are a good example of how new technologies have engaged people more directly with media consumption and production. In a traditional media set-up, the citizen is a receiver of information and has little participation in news production. However, new media allows for the citizen to be not only a consumer but a producer as well. Anybody with the means can access the internet as a sender, receiver or participant to whatever website they log on to and that explains

## ZIM BLOGS

- Letters – written by Cathy Buckle <http://cathybuckle.com>
- Denford Magora's Zimbabwe blog <http://denfordmagora.blogspot.com>
- Eddie Cross' website [www.eddiecross.africanherd.com](http://www.eddiecross.africanherd.com)
- The Bearded Man by Robb WJ Ellis aka Mandebvu <http://thebeardedman.blogspot.com/>
- The Zimbabwean Pundit <http://zimpundit.blogspot.com>

## Other Zimbabwean blogs

- Kubatana.net – an online community of Zimbabwean activists [www.kubatanablogs.net/kubatana/](http://www.kubatanablogs.net/kubatana/)
- Sokwanele by Zimbabwe Action Civic Support Group [www.sokwanele.com/](http://www.sokwanele.com/)
- Zimbabweblog.com “Many Zimbabweans, One Blog” brings together a number of Zimbabwean bloggers around the world to write and comment on issues Zimbabwean.
- Human rights in Zimbabwe – blog by Amnesty International [www.amnesty.ca/blog2.php?blog=human\\_rights\\_zimbabwe](http://www.amnesty.ca/blog2.php?blog=human_rights_zimbabwe)
- Townshipvibes.com for all the latest news from Zimbabwe and updates on the Zimbabwe situation.
- Petina's Blog by Petina Gappah, Zimbabwean writer and lawyer, living in Switzerland [www.petinagappah.com/](http://www.petinagappah.com/)
- For links to other top-rated blogs in Zimbabwe, visit Afrigator's blog stats at <http://afrigator.com/blogstats/countryblogs/Zimbabwe>

why ordinary citizens such as Cathy Buckle, Eddie Cross and Cont Mhlanga, to name a few, are blogging, reporting on contested topics.

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 sniff 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 these seemingly harsh laws, the flow of information out of the country is made easy by pervasive technology. The internet is self-governed and has resulted in a number of Zimbabwean citizens independently using it as a means of communication. One would find it intriguing that with a law such as the ICA in place, personal narrators still post stories knowing they could be convicted.

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## 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 through 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.

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