The New Media as Monitors of Democracy: Mobile Phones and Zimbabwe's 2008 Election

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Abstract

While Zimbabwe's first two post-independence elections in 1980 and 1985 were generally passed as a credible expression of the will of the people, subsequent elections in that country were largely contested, with allegations of rigging, gerrymandering, vote-buying and coercion, among several other irregularities. With a media landscape that is largely dominated by state ownership and control, the net reporting on elections in Zimbabwe has always been openly biased in favour of President Robert Mugabe's ruling ZANU PF party, resulting in a huge loss of credibility for both the electoral system and the state owned media themselves. However, the advent of new communications technologies such as the Internet and mobile phones has ushered in a new era of political communication where citizens actively participate both in the election campaign and monitoring processes. This paper looks at the contribution of the innovations in political communication that have come with these new media, focusing particularly on the convergence of mobile phones (in particular the SMS or short message service), the Internet and clandestine radio during Zimbabwe's contested 2008 election. More specifically it addresses the following questions: how have ordinary Zimbabweans appropriated the SMS as a tool for monitoring elections in that country? What are the implications of these new technologies for the conduct of elections in Zimbabwe and elsewhere on the African continent, and for democracy in general? What is clear is that these new forms of communication are fast eroding the monopoly of liberation movement governments over the communications landscape, undercutting the liberation discourse that has had a stranglehold on election processes, and signalling the possibility of more open political spaces where divergent views can co-exist.

Key words

Election monitoring; SMS; mobile phones; citizen journalist; Zimbabwe

Introduction/background

"We want people to know that if they are trying to rig the election, there could be someone behind them and that person may send a text message saying what happened."

-   Emauwa Nelson, Human Emancipation Lead Project, Nigeria[1]

"With communication and cell phones, this is where it is difficult to cheat in elections now. You are announced at the district level and cell phones go wild so by the time you go to the capital, if you have changed the figures, they will know and you will be caught out"

-   Kofi Anan, former United Nations Secretary-General.[2]

I would like to start with an anecdote to which I will return again at the end of the paper. At its December 2009 Congress, Zimbabwe's ruling ZANU-PF (Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front) party found itself under what it called an 'electronic warfare attack', where anonymous SMS messages were sent to hundreds of the country's mobile phone subscribers across the networks, claiming to be a party Youth League initiative meant to update the people on unfolding developments at the Congress. The SMS messages played on the widely known factionalism within the party, and implored delegates to reclaim the party which had been 'hijacked from the people' and also suggested that one of the factions, led by Vice President Joice Mujuru and her husband, Solomon, was calling for a 'young and vibrant leadership' to take charge of the party – presumably from the 86 year old President Robert Mugabe. The origin of the messages was traced to a Swedish mobile operator, Tele2 Comviq, which was believed to have used a discontinued number belonging to Econet Wireless network to conceal the true source of the message. Given the historic bad blood between the government of President Mugabe and Econet founder, Strive Masiyiwa,[3] ZANU PF was quick to accuse the network of attempting to sabotage its Congress. So disturbed was the party by these SMS messages that it issued a resolution at the end of the Congress:

> Congress, therefore condemns unequivocally, the Econet Wireless Network, for launching an electronic warfare attack against ZANU PF during this Congress by broadcasting falsehoods and hate messages designed to cause alarm and despondency in violation of Zimbabwe's laws and letter and spirit of the GPA.[4]

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[1] Posted on http://www.frontlinesms.com/, accessed 12 March 2010.

[2] Steere, M. (2008) 'Cell phones promise fairer elections in Africa': http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/europe/08/25/Cellphonedemocracy/, accessed 25 March 2010.

[3] Econet Wireless, founded by businessman Strive Masiyiwa, only obtained a licence to operate in 1998 after a lengthy legal battle with the government which lasted almost five years.

[4] See Full Text of the ZANU PF resolution, http://www.swradioafrica.com/pages/fulltext141209.htm, accessed 12 March 2010.

A number of interesting aspects can be picked up from this story. One is the way SMS messages are capable of tearing down boundaries between private and public, and more importantly make deliberations in a closed meeting public in record time. Another is the aspect of the potential breakdown of communicative sovereignty, where SMS messages from one country can bypass territorial borders and local regulations and cause discomfort in another country. Further, this brief anecdote illustrates that the SMS is becoming more than just an irritation for regimes with autocratic tendencies, and the resolution passed by the ZANU PF Congress serves as a veiled threat to close this burgeoning space. The use of terms or phrases contained in one of Zimbabwe's notorious laws (the Public Order and Security Act – generally referred to as POSA), such as 'falsehoods' and 'alarm and despondency' is a clear reminder that political authorities are ever ready to deploy countermeasures in response to the perceived power of the mobile phone.

This study critically analyses the emerging role of mobile phones, in particular through the short message service (SMS) as new monitors of elections in Africa, using Zimbabwe's 2008 election as a case study. It illustrates that while new media – plus an intersection between new and old media – are making tremendous inroads towards the empowerment of ordinary citizens to monitor electoral processes in Africa, there is need to assess the degree of agency exercised by these ordinary citizens in order to understand the nature and extent of empowerment derived from these technologies. It explores the innovations in political communication that have come with these new media in terms of how they are signalling new ways of conducting elections in Africa, and argues that the power to inform is no longer confined to professionalised groups such as political parties, the mainstream media, electoral commissions and observer missions but that it has become more diffuse, with citizens playing a crucial role in monitoring and safeguarding their votes. There are several factors that makes this new development exciting, particularly for elections in Africa whose results are often contested.

Traditionally, the role of election monitoring has been the preserve of foreign observer missions, local election officials, civil society organisations and the mass media, who were generally deemed as credible commentators on the conduct of elections. However, over the years, it has become increasingly clear that the role of international election monitors has become far more than mere monitoring and "report[ing] irregularities and deliver[ing] a considered judgement on the 'free and fair'-ness of the election" (van Kessel, 2000: 50). Rather, as van Kessel argues, election monitoring has evolved "from a basically technical exercise meant to check on correct procedures and to promote a 'levelling of the playing field' ... towards a political signal, involving a nod of approval or disapproval from donor countries" (ibid: 51). This creates a serious

problem where, as I illustrate below, observer missions pass verdicts that are in the interest of safeguarding peace while often ignoring the voices of the masses of ordinary people in the country concerned.

Increasingly, the role of international election observers in Africa has come under the spotlight, with questions raised about the extent to which they can be impartial in passing verdict on elections. Divergent reports from election monitoring groups in different countries are a clear indication that different observer missions have different interests when it comes to passing verdicts on the conduct of elections. The political agenda of donor countries can also influence the decisions of observer missions. While monitoring or observing presupposed detachment or disinterestedness, it is clear that observer missions are not necessarily disinterested. Van Kessel gives the example of South Africa's historic 1994 election, where a blurring of the roles of election observing and peace-keeping led to a situation where election observers became more interested in political stability than the free and fairness of the election. Election observers thus gave a nod to elite (party) deals in the interest of stability but which were not necessarily in the interest of the voting citizens (van Kessel, 2000: 54). Although this election has been touted as a model for other African countries to emulate, it is notable that the process was fraught with numerous irregularities which observer missions chose to ignore in the interest of projecting a miraculous transition from apartheid to democracy (van Kessel, 2000).

In Zimbabwe's 2008 election, the conflation of election monitoring and peace-keeping was quite evident among election observer missions. The call for power-sharing by the UN ambassador to Zimbabwe, Boniface Chidyausiku, even before the results were announced, for example, is clear indication that there was an overriding preoccupation to safeguard peace after the results were announced. In an interview with the BBC, Chidyausiku declared that, "There is no way anybody can do without the other". He further set the tone for a government of national unity by citing the Kenyan example, where a power-sharing deal brought an end to the 2007/8 post-election violence where some 1,500 people were killed.[5]

A further limitation of these election observer missions is that they can only visit a certain number of polling stations in a day, and cannot possibly be present in each and every constituency to witness firsthand what is going on. In vast countries with limited road networks such as the DRC and Nigeria, the logistical nightmares are quite obvious. Yet in some countries where political tensions are high, certain areas are declared 'no-go areas', where observers are

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[5] BBC News (2008) 'Power-sharing call for Zimbabwe', http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7372690.stm, accessed 13 March 2010

discouraged to visit – as was the case with some rural constituencies in Zimbabwe's post-2000 elections (see Waldahl, 2004).

In a context where the government of Zimbabwe literally prohibited countries and organisations deemed to be hostile to it from sending observer missions and rather hand-picked 'friendly' countries and organisations to do so, there were high chances of collusion to pass the elections as 'free and fair' even if the reality indicated otherwise.[6] It must also be noted that the Zimbabwe crisis had significantly divided the international community (the West versus the developing world) to a point where one can say that this was not just about choosing the next government for Zimbabwe. To most regional governments, particularly those still led by former liberation movements, this was seen as a moment of defending a fellow liberation movement, which was seen as besieged by Western enemies seeking to reverse the gains of Zimbabwe's independence.[7] To the Western powers involved, there was something more at stake, beyond the cliché pronouncements of democracy, human rights and good governance. What I am arguing here is that the larger political forces at play in Zimbabwe's 2008 election were deeply preoccupied with self-preservation while purporting to advance the causes/interests of ordinary Zimbabweans.

Pan-African considerations also influenced AU and SADC missions, which see themselves as in direct conflict with Western missions. Even before the completion of counting of votes in the first round of the election, the head of the SADC observer mission, Jose Marcos Barrica was quick to describe the election as "a peaceful and credible expression of the will of the people of Zimbabwe". The Electoral Commissions Forum of SADC Countries passed a vague endorsement of the election, stating that, "the Mission is of the opinion that the elections were conducted in compliance with the laws of Zimbabwe." Similar pronouncements came from the Common Market for East and Southern Africa (COMESA) and the Pan African Parliament Observation missions. The Comesa mission statement read in part:

> Looking at the country as a whole and taking into consideration the foregoing, the Mission has come to the conclusion that the 2008 Harmonised Elections for the Republic of Zimbabwe took place in an environment of peace, and tranquillity... In short, the process took place in an environment, which was transparent and secure enough to guarantee the freedom of the vote and secure the will of the voters (Comesa, 2008: 4).

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[6] See, for example, Rusere, P & Moyo, B 2008 "Zimbabwean Government Selective in Accrediting Election Observers", *Voice of America*, 7 March, [www] http://voanews.com/english/Africa/Zimbabwe/2008-03-07-voa72.cfm; Jongwe, F 2008 "Western monitors barred from Zim poll", *Mail & Guardian*, 7 March, http://www.mg.co.za/article/2008-03-07-western-monitors-barred-from-zim-poll (accessed 5 Mar 2010). (accessed 11 March 2010)

[7] Indeed, liberation movements held meetings during this period to take a position on how to defend themselves from a perceived threat from Western forces.

Pan African Parliament Election Observation Mission statement read in part that:

> ... the Mission has concluded that the environment for holding an election was conducive. It is the Mission's considered view that the irregularities that were detected were not so major as to compromise the flow of the electoral process... On the overall, the basic conditions of credible, free and fair elections as contained in the OUA/African Union Declaration ... were reflected in the Zimbabwe Harmonised Elections, thus far.

These pronouncements, as we shall see below, ran contrary to sentiments expressed by ordinary people, making citizen self-monitoring of elections a highly attractive emerging practice. Further to this, the growing mistrust for state institutions such as the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission has made it imperative to have a parallel monitoring system that is neither linked to the state nor other non-state institutions which might have their own interests to advance.

Throughout the world, ownership and control of means of communication have always been seen as critical aspects of political power since time immemorial. In most African countries, where governments own and control a sizeable number of newspapers and radio stations, the so-called independent media have been seen as the true monitors of democracy (Ronning & Kupe, 2000). However, these 'independent media' also come with their own sets of problems (see, for example, Kasoma, 1997 on the *Post* in Zambia). The dependence of some of these private media on donor support has also meant that sometimes they exaggerate issues in order to please their sponsors. The advent of mobile phones and the Internet, which provide "many-to-many and one-to-one horizontal communication channels that bypass political or business control of communication" (Castells et al, 2007: 209) therefore creates new possibilities for citizens to produce more reliable and credible information about their elections.

User determinism and political economy of the mobile phone in Africa

Research on mobile phones in Africa has tended to be largely anthropological in nature (see, for example, de Bruijn et al, 2009; Goggin, 2006) looking at social uses of this new technology among youths and other groups in society; it has also been quantitative in nature – looking at how diffusion of the mobile phone has fast outpaced fixed line telephony, giving rise to talk about leapfrogging Africa into the digital future. Most of this research has been largely descriptive and often celebratory to the extent that it has inadvertently augmented the more instrumental research conducted by the wireless network companies seeking to know more about markets and the emerging mobile phone use patterns among different segments of African

society. Critical questions around policy and regulation and the political economy of mobile phones on the continent as such, for instance, have largely not been addressed.

Initial responses to the spread of the mobile phone in Africa clearly fell within the technological determinism paradigm, as NGOs and Western governments lay emphasis on the capacity of these new technologies to democratise the continent. In the excitement of dismissing assumptions about technological determinism, often the reaction from media scholars have broadly pointed towards social constructivism in the ways in which this technology has taken root on the continent. Clearly, Africans in various parts of the continent have given new meanings and usages to the mobile phone, such as the unique use for 'beeping' and placing a 'please call me' by those who do not have 'air time.' Putting people at the centre of technological development is of course an appealing prospect, as it is suggestive of agency and subaltern transformative power. Indeed, as Castells et at (2007: 2) have argued, "the more a technology is interactive, the more it is likely that the users become the producers of the technology in their social practice." But a cautionary word is necessary here. Where it comes to mass-scale usages of new technologies, often it is institutions and organised civil society which drive ordinary members of society to adapt these technologies in certain ways – often in ways that coincide with their own instrumental purposes. Most literature on mobile phones and social change is quick to ascribe power to ordinary people or the grassroots who are seen as refashioning the uses of these new technologies to suit their needs, environment and purposes. Manji (2008) for instance, puts ordinary people in the driving seat of social change:

> Social change is actually driven not by technology but by ordinary people being able to exert an authority over their own experience and, through common actions, developing the courage to determine their own destiny.

This study is partly interested in examining the extent to which ordinary Zimbabweans contributed to the shaping of mobile phones as tools for election monitoring. Mobile phones have been seen as providing "a powerful platform for political autonomy on the basis of independent channels of autonomous communication from person to person" (Castells et al, 2007: 185). The ability of users to receive messages from a known source through mobile phones, as Castells et al argue, set them apart from the traditional mass media and enhances their credibility, while their capacity for "flash mobilisation" has meant that they have "a considerable impact on formal politics and government decisions" (ibid). Because of their ability to transmit voice calls, text, images, and sounds, mobile phones become "living eyes and ears, together with minds, to observe events in real time and share them with the network" (ibid: 211). Evident in

these descriptions of the mobile phone in the hands of ordinary citizens is the assumed power that they give to the users who are able to network and produce incredible results in record time. Yet it can be argued that placing a mobile phone into one's hand does not necessarily transform one into an activist or citizen journalist. For example, in South Africa, where mobile phone penetration is highest on the continent, there hasn't been much use of the mobile phone for activism. It takes something more than just the mobile phone to generate mobile activism – including the knowledge about the capacity of the technology, an organising force at the centre and often some funding to provide the necessary equipment or software that makes distribution of bulk messages possible.

Shifting the centre of power: From observer missions to citizen monitors

If there is anything that clearly distinguished Zimbabwe's March 2008 election from all the previous elections held since independence in 1980 (of course apart from what Jonathan Moyo described as a world record in the month-long delay in announcing the results), it is the part played by ordinary citizens and members of civil society using their mobile phones to monitor that election. For a number of reasons, this particular election was not business as usual, both for the ruling party and for the opposition alike. For the ruling party, it posed the greatest challenge ever to its 28-year rule, given its loss of popularity in the midst of an unprecedented economic crisis. For the opposition, it was expected to be a turning point, a defining moment for Zimbabwean democracy, judging by its growing popularity with the masses. The mobile phone was for the first time to play a significant role in monitoring that election. Although it had been part of Zimbabwean social life since the late 1990s, at no other time had the mobile phone been considered a critical tool in the election process.

In situations where the role and judgement of election observers is often influenced by priorities of maintaining political stability or the interests of donor countries, as argued above, citizens become the best (and perhaps most trustworthy) observers of their own elections. Even the so-called independent media, which several scholars have identified as key watchdogs and even monitors of democracy (van Kesse, 2000; Ansah, 1991; Ronning and Kupe, 2000) can sometimes be compromised by unashamedly serving as propaganda mouthpieces for the opposition. In some cases, owing to their weak economic base, independent media take donor money and end up parroting the ideas of their donors. This is not to say that the mobile phones are totally above such threats of external capture. On the contrary, the donor-driven nature in

which the mobile phone has mutated into a tool for monitoring democracy in Africa could in itself pose a threat of similar nature, where the donors become the determinants of the social uses which these new technologies assume.

Organisations such as Kubatana, Sangonet, Fahamu, among others, for instance, have pioneered ways of making the mobile phone serve not just as a tool for person-to-person communication, but as a potential mass mobilisation tool of sorts. Kubatana's SMS service had some 7,500 subscribers by October 2009, with a growth rate of over 200 new members per month (Atwood, 2010: 90). Through the FrontlineSMS tool, for instance, Kubatana is able to receive messages from aggregated individuals which it can amplify by sending out as bulk SMS messages without the need for Internet access. The organisation has often used its privileged position to set the agenda by stirring debate on topics it deemed pertinent at particular moments. Without the intervention of Kubatana, for instance, it is inconceivable that mobile phones could have made the tremendous impact they did on Zimbabwe's 2008 election. As one interviewee noted: "Throughout the election period, I received numerous SMS messages from anonymous numbers. It was phenomenal ..." But again such concerns about a powerful organisation at the centre of this communication could also lead to wrong assumptions about the powerlessness of mobile phone users in Africa. Studies so far indicate that Africans living in different countries and under different socio-economic and political conditions have fashioned their own ways of relating to and appropriating the mobile phone (see, for instance Nyamnjoh, 2005). Communicative power is perhaps far more diffuse, especially when one considers the ways in which information is transmitted in multiple platforms.

Kubatana itself is unambiguous about its self-appointed role of providing Zimbabweans with information in context where internet access and the reach of newspapers are severely limited. Its website claims that, "Our SMS service has informed Zimbabweans about public meetings and events, shared inspirational quotations, asked for feedback about pressing issues such as price controls and HIV/AIDS, and offered materials such as DVDs for people to share amongst their colleagues."

During the election process, individuals, members of civil society and opposition political parties engaged in capturing and sharing information about the conduct of elections in their constituencies, including election results once they were posted outside polling centres, using their mobile phones. Some of the text messages generated by ordinary citizens subscribing to Kubatana which were circulated during and after the election capture the mood and atmosphere of the election, which was generally seen as not free and not fair:

How can the ZEC (Zimbabwe Electoral Commission) claim the elections will be free and fair when they order ballot papers that are not equal to the number net registered voters (sic).

Ko mapurisa 5 anodei paPolling station imhosva here kuvhota. (Why do we need five police officers at a polling station? Is it a crime to vote?)

The army have moved Tanks frm Inkomo Barracks, why?

There is a war chopper since Wednesday roving n the skies nearer to the ground in Mutoko its frightening (sic).

The rigging machinery is now defunct and malfunctioning. Their days are numbered! The masses say NO! The aged dictator's time is nigh, darkness overshadows him.

Airforce jets overflying Masvingo of the past 2days.intimidation of the opposition (sic).

These messages ran contrary to the descriptions provided by observer missions and are more reflective about how ordinary Zimbabweans felt about the election process. This information was also posted on the Internet – on personal blogs as well as news websites such as *NewZimbabwe.com*, *Thezimbabwean.com* and *ZWNews.com*. Besides information, people also circulated via text messages and the Internet jokes satires mocking President Mugabe and his ruling ZANU PF and their 'exposed' rigging machinery (see Moyo, 2009).

Thus despite the record month-long delay in announcing results, ordinary people, assisted by civic organisations, had come up with their own results which were distributed via SMS and later on Internet – feeding both the domestic and diasporic communities. Kubatana sent a text message to its subscribers asking their opinion on the idea of a government of national unity. The message read: *Kubatana! Government of national unity: Solution or sell out? What do you think? Reply with your thoughts via SMS or email infor [at] kubatana [dot] org [got] zw*. The response, according to the website managers, was overwhelming: "We received a flood of replies, particularly via SMS, with voices against a government of national unity outnumbering those in favour of it by 10:1"[8] Although no figures are available on the number of messages sent out by the three networks during this period, interviewees have indicated that the networks became so clogged that messages could not be transmitted instantly. The general sentiment from these messages was that the MDC, which was believed to have won the election, should be allowed to take over the reins of government, and that a government of national unity would be a travesty of justice and a violation of the will of the people as expressed in that election. Some of the messages read:

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[8] http://www.kubatanablogs.net/kubatana/?p=576, accessed 11 March 2010.

Definitely No No No. No to any government of national unity. It will be a betrayal to the peace loving people of Zimbabwe. Compromise and appeasement are the seeds for a mutation of more corruption oppression and injustice. We have come this far down the road to overthrow this evil regime we must go all the way, and see a collapse of this evil system of bondage and destruction, Not only for Zimbabwe but the whole of SADC.

How can you make unity with a loser? Why would you go for a penalty shoot out when your team won 2-0. MDC has won the match and by now they must be in office doing the job. BIG NO to govt of national unity.

No. MDC won so it should form its own govt. People's vote to stand as it is. Zanu has stolen 3 previous elections referendum & 2 elections. Stolen country's riches. We didn't fight liberation war for a couple of people.

A government of national unity will be utter betrayal on the people of Zimbabwe. The mere thought of it is betrayal. It would be better to remain an opposition

Unity with thieves who are not ready to reform is a betrayal of the ppl's will. The ppl have spoken. Great betrayal!

The few voices who supported the GNU did so with some qualification, such as insisting that MDC should be the leading partner, or that Mugabe and his old ministers should not be part of the new government. For example one subscriber had this to say:

It is ok to have a government of National Unity, but only if Mugabe is not the head. We do not want the set-up like the one in Kenya whereby the man who lost in the elections is still the one heading the country. We know who we voted for, and Morgan is the one.

While this may not necessarily be an accurate measurement of public opinion, it is a modest indicator of the prevailing thinking among ordinary Zimbabweans during this critical election. Thus in a context where spontaneous mass rallies are outlawed through the Public Order and Security Act (POSA), SMS messages in a way provide the space for mass protest, which was articulated through jokes, rumours and other such 'parallel information'. The impact of all this cannot be easily ascertained, though it has been claimed that the ability of ordinary Zimbabweans to conduct 'parallel citizen reporting' forced the government of President Mugabe to delay announcement of results by up to a month. As Bob LaGamma argued, "Parallel reporting was important in Zimbabwe. It kept them from coming straight out and reporting a false results" (cited in Steere, 2008).

SMS, Internet, Clandestine and 'Pavement' Radio Convergence

While the mobile phone in Zimbabwe has been described as a potential "access equaliser" for different segments of society – in comparison to other media such as satellite television, the Internet or independent newspapers (Atwood, 2010: 102), it is evident that the economic crisis that has gripped the country since 2000 has significantly reduced that potential. The price distortions that accompanied the collapse of the Zimbabwe dollar and its resultant replacement with the American dollar have placed mobile phone services out of reach for the majority of Zimbabweans. For instance, before September 2009, Zimbabweans paid some of the highest mobile phone tariffs in the region, at US$0.30 per minute for voice calls and US$0.15 per text message. These have been reduced to US$0.25 and US$0.09 respectively. The cost of a pre-paid line also fell from around US$100 in 2008 to US$30 – which is still way too expensive compared to other countries in the region where getting a line is almost free (see Atwood, 2010: 101-2). The success of text messages in Zimbabwe can therefore only be explained by a convergence of various media which helps amplify the messages circulated among the few who have access to mobile phones – including the Internet, private newspapers, clandestine radio and what Steven Ellis (1989) has described as 'pavement radio' (see Moyo, 2010). The leading weekly private newspaper, the Zimbabwe Independent, for instance has developed a column to tap on so-called citizen journalists, publishing SMS messages sent by ordinary Zimbabweans. Indeed during the 2008 election, the paper also drew some of its stories from citizen journalists (ibid). Similarly, a UK-based 'clandestine' radio station that beams into Zimbabwe through shortwave as well as the Internet, SW Radio Africa has used SMS as a critical tool of both gathering and disseminating news.

With the gradual shift to 3G systems in the region, internet will become more widely available to mobile users, thereby speeding up the convergence between text messaging and Internet usaga. In South Africa, for instance, more and more mobile phone packages now come with unlimited Internet access, and some with direct access to the popular social network forum, Facebook.

While the use of text messages in conjunction with internet tools such as blogs, listservs, etc. is still in its infancy in Zimbabwe, there have been significant impacts in Nigeria in 2007, Ghana in 2008, Kenya in 2002, 2004; 2006 and Sierra Leone in 2007 where mobiles were used to combat election rigging.

Conclusion

Although one cannot point to substantial political change as a result of 'people power' expressed through mobile phones similar to incidences such as the ouster of Estrada through what has been dubbed People Power II in the Philippines in 2001, or the sweeping to victory of South Korean President Moo-Hyun in 2002 (see Castells et al, 2007; Rheingold, 2006), one cannot ignore the significant role played by text messaging in the dissemination of information during and after the 2008 election in Zimbabwe. What is remarkable is what this portends for future election monitoring in Zimbabwe and beyond. Similarly, one cannot ignore the limitations of the mobile phones as a result of the differential access that it comes with. Its ability to connect with clandestine radio, private newspapers and the Internet, therefore become necessary for amplifying the reach of the voices of ordinary people.

Apart from the dangers of posed by the SMS alluded to at the beginning of the paper, where communicative sovereignty can be compromised by the technology's ability to bypass borders and local regulations, it is notable that mobile phones potentially give more power to powerful nations to influence elections and other developments in weaker nations – as the ZANU PF congress incident illustrates.

One question this paper sought to address relates to the degree of agency exercised by ordinary Zimbabweans in using mobile phones to monitor the 2008 election, and just how spontaneous their political actions were. The paper illustrates that for ordinary citizens to make the impact they did, it was necessary to have a coordinating force at the centre – in the form of a well-resourced organisation with the necessary tools to receive and send out bulk SMS messages. As such, one can argue that although Zimbabwean citizens exercised agency by sending out jokes and information to one another, this exercise would not have had the impact it had without Kubatana. In this particular case, it is also important to stress that without an enabling electoral legal framework, use of mobile phones to monitor the election, particularly the ability to capture and distribute results, could not have been possible. The changes to the electoral law which demanded the posting of results outside polling stations, for instance, made it possible for citizens to collect and share results from the various constituencies and come up with their own results well before the official figures were announced.

Further, it remains unclear how significant this emerging form of citizen engagement can be, and the extent to which repressive regimes can take them seriously or even tolerate them. It must be noted that in Zimbabwe, the government of President Mugabe did not sit idle as people sent

each other messages about the 2008 election. Indeed, several pro-Mugabe messages were circulated – some to pre-empt the results and prepare the voters for a re-run. In Ethiopia, text messaging was suspended after the May 2005 election, only to be reopened in 2007. And can this citizen monitoring lead to an improvement in the quality of elections in Africa? It is perhaps too early to tell, but there is a growing sense that the knowledge that there is someone wielding a mobile phone who can instantly send a text message reporting an incident can serve as a deterrent against rigging. This however is based on a narrow perception of election rigging which focuses on the actual day of voting. Yet rigging can take various forms, starting even before the actual voting itself. The citizen SMS messages reporting helicopters hovering over their constituencies as a form of intimidation can therefore pass as part of the pre-election monitoring.

More importantly, despite the great promises brought by the mobile phones, there remain some larger questions that are yet to be addressed in order to get a clearer understanding of the nature and role of their usage in Africa. Questions about who owns the mobile networks (including their global origins and connections to local political elites), how they got to own them, how they are regulated, the cost to users – especially the cost of so-called 'cheap' SMS – remain largely unexplored, with some serious consequences for the ideals of universal access/universal service and democratisation which generally underpin scholarly discussion on the media and society in general. Apart from the question of the new inequalities that come with the differential access to the mobile phones, there are also questions about their contribution to development in Africa. A cost and benefit analysis is perhaps long overdue.

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