Original Research Article

The Role of Social Media in the Mediation of Conflicts

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Abstract

The study explored the role of social media in the mediation of conflicts in Zimbabwe, with particular focus on the January 2019 protest in Hwange community. The continued exploitation of social media in protests in Zimbabwe with little or no strategies deliberated to de-escalate conflicts led into this inquiry. It was guided by the need to examine use of social media by Hwange people during January 2019 protests, establish how social media mediated January 2019 protests in Hwange and probe whether social media contributed to the escalation or de-escalation of January 2019 protests. It adopted a qualitative research approach with case research design and thematically analysed gathered primary and secondary data. The social constructionist approach to technology and mediatized conflict theories were utilised. The study conveniently sampled fifty residents and purposively sampled one journalist, one ward councilor, and four academics. In-depth interview and open-ended questionnaire guides were used. The results showed that audio-visuals encouraged residents to mobilise and participate in a protest. Furthermore, social media can either emancipate, give voice to voiceless or offer potential to reduce or fuel protest. The study concluded that use of videos, images, text and audios have potential to influence and escalate conflicts in Zimbabwe. Social media provided a formidable force that helped in mobilisation and to influence January 2019 protest and contributed to the escalation of the January 2019 protest. Lawmakers must re-align some sections of acts and repeal draconic laws and sections to offer media plurality, neutrality and freedom of expression and after expression to media institutions and journalists. Further studies to consider a comparative study and explore the same topic for comparative results.

Keywords: social media, conflict, mediation, protest, mobilization, information.

INTRODUCTION

This study investigated the role of social media in the mediation of conflicts in Zimbabwe' post Robert Mugabe era, with particular focus on the January 2019 protest in Hwange community. Social media have facilitated the organisation and mobilisation of many revolutions around the world including the much celebrated Arab Spring (Douai and Moussa, 2013; Hermida, Lewis and Zamith, 2013; Bohler–Muller and van der Merwe, 2011). Likewise, the demonstrations that led to the removal of Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and imminent overthrow of Mubarak (Brown, Guskin and Mitchell, 2012), the ouster of President Omar al-Bashir in Sudan (BBC news, 2019 April), #Feesmustfall and #RhodesMustFall in South Africa (Ahmed, 2019; Mpofu, 2017), and the protests over disputed polls in Malawi (*Aljazeera news/Africa*, 2019 December) offer examples of how social media have been utilised in protests. While social media have revolutionised the way people deliberate, seek justice and hold leaders accountable, this study was also built on scholarship that explored how social media have been used in the political field of Zimbabwe and the increase in fuel price that remained contested with the social fabric, establish how social media mediated of conflicts and further established whether social media contributed in the escalation of conflicts in Zimbabwe.

The technological advancements have strengthened the interconnectedness of nations and digitalised the world. Likewise, the emergence of Web 2.0 has generated a pluralised social media in the communication industry. Social

media platforms have been and are constantly changing the way societies behave and the way information is disseminated. Most precisely, the protests and information emphasis has been coded through Hashtags activism. However, in repressive environments like in Zimbabwe where draconian laws such as the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) and Broadcasting Service Act (BSA) and Public Order and Security Act (POSA) amended to Maintenance of Peace and Order Act (MOPA) among others, have been promulgated to muzzle the media and stifle freedom of expression (Government of Zimbabwe, 2019; Mpofu, 2015). Social media are however challenging the hegemony of the ruling party Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) by enhancing virtual deliberation. Regardless of social media supporting the societies living under repressive regimes to find alternative techniques and tools of communication, there is a need to question if social media were influencing conflicts.

The change of leadership in Zimbabwe on 24 November 2017 gave "hope" and assurance of a new and peaceful era. Citizens believed in the new Zimbabwe as imagined through the ruling party's "New dispensation" and an "open to business" mantras. On the 12th of January 2019, the president announced an increase in fuel price of over 200 percent to $3.31 per litre, making the country's petrol price the highest in the world. The increase in fuel price is thought to be among the reasons that triggered the January 2019 protest. The move to increase fuel price was condemned by Zimbabweans across the political divide on social media as they feared that this would increase the price of basic commodities. In response to the state pronouncement, the President of Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) on the 13th mobilised for a three day-stay away (stay at home) from the 14th to 16th of the same month, imploring the government to address the price increase and workers' cost of living. The disseminated video that went viral on social media platforms supported with audios and text messages enhanced the mobilisation of citizens to go on stay away.

People heeded the call and used WhatsApp, Facebook and other internet messaging services to propagate photos, audio, videos and text messages of events that transpired as the protests progressed though ended up inaccessible. WhatsApp groups such as "ShutDownZimbabwe-Harare""ShutDownZimbabwe-Masvingo""ShutDownZimbabwe-Gweru" "ShutDownZimbabwe-Hwange","ShutDownZimbabwe-Bulawayo" were formulated and used to share the initial audio-visuals of the proceedings during the protests. As the protest gained momentum in Harare and Bulawayo, small towns like Hwange and Masvingo weighed in causing the situation to be tense and led the government to switch off the internet. Moreover, the government deployed the state security who heavily cramped down on the violent protestors and looters. Although there were no definite statistics of protestors that were killed, it is reported that 242 were assaulted, tortured and subjected to degrading treatment , an approximate number of five to twelve people were killed and 200 arrested during the clamp down (Chutel 2019; *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) news online*, 2019 January 18). Similarly, the government through the *Reuters* (2019, January 18) stated that three people were killed during the unrest. Although the aim of shutting down of internet can be guessed as a bid to stop citizens from circulating messages on social media and quell the violence, various stakeholders including the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, and civil society organisations blamed the act of blocking the internet (*Reuters,* 2019, January 18).

Hwange is a coal mining town located in Matabeleland North Province and is a community with individuals converging from diverse cultural experiences and speak various indigenous languages such as Tonga, Nambya, Nyanja, Ndebele and Shona. These residents belong to different political parties and are thought to have been affected directly by the fuel price increase. In this perspective, Lwendulu township in Hwange town like other towns such as Bulawayo, Harare and Masvingo, was subjected to the January 2019 protest. The visual-audios disseminated through social media platforms from other cities encouraged the demonstrators in this area to mobilise for a protest. However, this protest was not the first of its kind in this area. On 7 October 2013 and 29 January 2018, wives of workers and widows had to protest against Hwange Colliery Company's failure to pay salaries forcing them into abject poverty (Centre for Natural Resource Governance (CNRG) (2018). Though in the 2018 demonstration the police declined to assist the company in thwarting the protest, the 2013 protest saw the police heavy handedness to suppress the protest (CNRG, 2018) while muzzling the voice of the women from financial freedom. Thus, the researcher considers this locality important to probe whether social media escalated or de-escalated the January 2019 protest among the residents of Zimbabwe in particular Lwendulu in Hwange.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The utilisation of social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and YouTube in Zimbabwe's political spheres has mediated several conflicts that have triggered the change of governments, stay aways (shut downs) and diverse phenomenon. In addition, these tools are criticised for generating mercenary weapons of propaganda and proliferation of fake news dominating the public domain with curiosity of truths and anxiety. From this perspective, it might appear that these tools cannot be relied upon due to their criticism about fabrications. However, they have also been applauded to have led to several successful revolutions and stay aways. The government of Zimbabwe has on several occasions responded by blaming social media for spreading falsehoods, and organising violent demonstrations. To suppress dissent, the regime further enacted and publicised several media space restrictive laws including the hyped cyber security and data protection bill and intercepted the internet. The interception of internet is evidence that the use of social media are

deemed as a threat to democracy as believed to have led to the success of the January 2019 protest. Thus, this study sought to explore the role of social media in the mediation of conflicts in Zimbabwe post Mugabe era, with particular focus on the January 2019 protest in Hwange community.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES
The study is guided by the following objectives:
- **To examine the use of social media by the people of Hwange during the January 2019 protests.**
- **To establish how social media mediated the January 2019 protests in Hwange.**
- **To probe whether social media contributed to the escalation or de-escalation of the January 2019 protests**

LITERATURE REVIEW
The mushrooming of social media provides an alternative space for deliberation with divergence of views. Conflictingly, social media have been utilised in various uprisings with networks formed online to facilitate activists and activism around the world and Africa (Khamis and Katherine, 2012). Howard and Muzammil (2011) argue that during demonstrations citizens take advantage and emphasise the importance of the internet, mobile phones and social media to intersperse information and create links. Digitally, social media have been useful to citizens to exercise their right to freedom of speech and act as a conduit for civic engagement. These varied practices necessitate different views on what is meant by social media among the scholars.

In this perspective, social media can be defined in terms of social interactivity as referred by Manning (2014) that they are novel forms of media that involve interactive participation. Furthermore, social media are defined by Huang and company (2013:246) as "Internet-based applications built on Web 2.0, even though Web 2.0 refers to a concept as well as a platform for harnessing collective intelligence." The premise for shared aptitude is enhanced when social media are typified to Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn that empowers individuals with a pervasive network connectivity.

The importance of social interaction is not a new phenomenon although seeming to be fascinating in the 21st century through social networking and the use of social media. Norris (2012) argues that social networking was important long before the invention of the internet and has significant roles in political communication and views that Social media may function to sustain and facilitate collective action, but this is only one channel of communications amongst many, and processes of political communications cannot be regarded as a fundamental driver of unrest compared with many other structural factors, such as corruption, hardship, and repression (Norris, 2012:5)

Zeitzoff (2017) theorises that the impact of social media on conflict is projected on (1) easier communication for individuals and groups, (2) increased speed and spread of information (either true or false), (3) collaboration and strategic dynamics between movements and elites and (4) generation of new data and information about popularity, support and the conflict environment. In fact social media have added arrows to the quivers of activists to swiftly mobilise protesters, undermine regimes' legitimacy and increase both national and international exposure of establishment's atrocities (as suggested by Haward and Hussain, 2011). Actually, the media have transformed the behaviour, culture and politics, and increased the feeling of attachment while creating a seamless world.

Media play an informative role, watchdog role, serve as a two-way channel between the governed and the govern, serve as identity suppliers by reflecting on how people portray themselves and offer a wide spectrum of roles for people to take up. Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng and White (2009) add that the media provide facilitative role, radical role and collaborative role in promoting or hindering both democracy and development, the roles of social media are interlinked or rather the same. Some other notable roles include the educational role, advocacy role in nation building, peace, reconciliation to mention just a few. Social media roles go further to being the fifth estate, watching the watchdog (Cooper, 2006) and providing a public sphere especially for the subaltern counter publics (Squires, 2006; Asen, 2000; Fraser, 1990). However, the media can be subjective to certain discourses where instead of questioning and correcting inaccurate opinions they may side with that particular group or party (Chiumbu, 2013).

The world over, mediation of conflicts has a long history and appears slightly different in the way it affects the social fabric across geographical locations and cultures. Chebii (2015:44) supports that "history has shown that the media can incite people towards violence". This effect revolves around the differences on political disparities, with key actors like the media, which in conflict seek to manipulate public perceptions of the disagreement. The Aljazeera (2019) headlined that "Venezuela engulfed in a major crisis amid the escalating international battle over Nicolas Maduro's presidency", to illustrate how United States influenced other powers and countries through the media to illegally acknowledge the opposition leader Juan Guaido as Interim president in an ongoing conflict. Further, Rodny-Gumede (2015:360), argues that in times of conflicts "commercial mainstream media rely predominantly on stereotypical discourses within conflict." The Daily Sun in South Africa stereotypes immigrants and labelled them illegal even though they have the required documents (Rodny-Gumede, 2015). The label contributed to hate towards the immigrants by South Africans and led to

xenophobic attacks and even today foreigners live fearing for their lives. The Rwandan 1994 genocide is another case where the Hutus through the controlled RTLM radio and Kangura newspaper spread hate speech by naming and labelling the Tutsi as cockroaches that needed to be exterminated and this encouraged people to hate and kill each other (Thompson, 2007).

The study is hinged on mediatized conflict theoretical approach by Simon Cottle (2006). Scholars define mediatization as the process by which warfare is increasingly embedded in and infiltrated by media as a means of understanding shifting media power on and its use by a range of actors. Mediatization as a new and much-debated concept "captures more complex, active and performative ways that the media are involved in conflicts today" (Cottle, 2006:9) considering that (according to Cottle,2006) people live in spaces where conflicts are organised and spearheaded by media. Thus, the concept "mediatized" "… emphasise the complex ways in which media are often implicated within conflicts while disseminating ideas and images about them" (Cottle, 2006:iv). Taking cognisance of the highlighted, social media cannot be exonerated from the strategic planning of protest activities but demonised as an effective weapon for digital activism.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Quinlan, Babin, Carr, Griffin and Zikmund (2015) stated that research methodology is a systematic way to solve the research problem through systematic data collection, analysis and interpretation. This study adopted a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research is considered as a multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. Creswell (2014; 2009) considers it as an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological backgrounds of investigation that explore a social or human problem. Since the data in qualitative research depends on human experience, more compelling and powerful than data gathered through quantitative research, this approach became significant to explore the role of social media in the mediation of conflicts.

RESEARCH STRATEGY

This research adopted a case study research strategy. Creswell (20140 described a case study as a flexible but challenging methodology commonly used in social science research. In comparison to other forms of research designs, a case study design is less predetermined and changing in many ways depending on the nature of the eventual case (Cresswell, 2009) of the particular problem being studied. It allows for in-depth review of new or unclear phenomena whilst retaining the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events. Cresswell (2014) recommend a case study approach since it takes advantage of individuals as sources of data and interactions between people when analysing events within their natural setting.

The case study research design allows for systematic gathering of data about a particular person or group and this permitted the researcher to effectively understand how the subject operates or functions.

STUDY POPULATION

The total population of 37522 residents of Hwange town (Zimbabwe National Statistics, ZIMSTAT, 2012) were considered for this particular research. This population excludes Hwange rural and Victoria Falls that together make up Hwange District. However, for the purpose of the study, the population consisted of two (2) journalists, twenty-six (26) staff from Zimbabwe Open University-Matabeleland North Campus, fourteen (14) councilors from Hwange Central and fifty (50) residents from Lwendulu township. The chosen population was deemed as the general populace that were affected by the January 2019 protest and are knowledgeable about the problem being researched considering that are from the media fraternity and some being leaders within the political rank and file. Thus, the individuals were considered to have the quality information sought for by this particular study.

SAMPLE SIZE

From the population indicated above, the study sample size included one (01) journalist from *NewZiana*, one (01) ward councilor from Lwendulu township, four (04) academics from Zimbabwe Open University and fifty (50) residents above the age of eighteen (18) from Lwendulu townnship, Hwange. Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe, et al (2018) noting Sandelowski (1996) argue that samples in qualitative research are small to support the depth of case-oriented analysis fundamental to the qualitative research inquiry. For this reason, the study did not involve everyone in the area of study but selected a few to inquire about the phenomenon under study.

SAMPLING TECHNIQUES AND SAMPLING PROCEDURES

Quinlan, et al (2015) defined sampling as a group of items taken from the population for examination. Sampling technique is a plan set forth in order to be sure that the sample used in the research study represents the population from which the sample is drawn (Cresswell 2014). This study adopted purposive and convenience sampling techniques in selecting the participants. Thus, the researchers purposively sampled one (01) journalist from *NewZiana*, one (01) ward

councilor from Lwendulu township and four (04) academic from Zimbabwe Open University in order to have an inquisitive explanation of the role of social media in the mediation of conflicts. The researchers then conveniently sampled fifty (50) residents who were above the age of eighteen (18) years and those who were within the proximity to the researcher, all from the area under investigation to obtain the required information on the role of social media in the mediation of conflicts.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

This research considered in-depth interviews and open-ended questionnaires as research instruments. The interviews were conducted with one (01) journalist, one (01) ward councilor from Lwendulu and four (04) academics while open-ended questionnaires were administered to fifty (50) residents from Lwendulu. The researcher made sure that respondents under the age of eighteen (18) did not participate due to the nature of data gathered. However, the study found it necessary to use both the in-depth interviews and open-ended questionnaires to evaluate the credibility and increase dependability of the research findings since the phenomenon understudy is complex and multifaceted in nature.

The researcher then personally administered fifty (50) questionnaires to fifty (50) local residents of Lwendulu township who were conveniently met along the road and in the neighbourhood. The researcher collected the open-ended questionnaires upon completion and even permitted those who preferred to respond while home to do so. For those who preferred to respond while home, the researcher had to trace them. However, amongst the fifty questionnaires administered to residents, only forty were completed and returned

Findings

The research demography showed participants from those with the ages of 18 to 42 years. These ages of participants offer a flourishing assertion of significant information acquisition as required by this study as they are among and represent the age bracket of info tech-active users and consumers believed to keenly follow trending issues on social media platforms. In addition, the study showed male dominance of 25 males and 15 females. This domination of male participants provided male skewed interpretations towards the findings of the research on the role of social media in the mediation of conflicts in Zimbabwe as compared to those of females.

The study questioned the residents to get their views concerning the 14th and 16th January 2019 protest that took place in Zimbabwe. The participants indicated that the protest was a political campaign for a better living condition and wage. Others held the view that the untold suffering and decayed health situation provided enough reason for resistance and revolution and these views are in agreement with Chitanana (2020), Hove and Chenzi (2020), Mungwari and Ndhlebe (2019), Gukurume (2017), that mobilisation is considered in line with subjectivity of poverty, human rights abuses, corruption and decaying health care. However, some added that the level of unemployment, sky-rocketing prices of basic commodities, increase in fuel prices, and social injustice instigated people to demonstrate.

From the results, the study found that the fuel price increase sparked the protest. It also perceived that the increase in fuel price impact on prices of commodities that would then add to the already deteriorating livelihood of the majority. These findings concurred with the report published in *The Guardian* (2019, January 16) and with those findings from the interviews conducted. Contrarily, the results showed that residents used WhatsApp to mobilise and organise themselves while agitating others to join through constant updates. However, the use of social media was condemned for dissemination of old, repetitive and unauthentic posts. From the study, the researchers understand that the protest was a way to communicate displeasure by disgruntled citizens. The study further underscored that individuals demonstrated for their civil liberties that were not respected as the internet was shut down. The findings suggested that the protest was a necessary evil despite apportioning blame to trade unions, civil society organisations mainly the opposition parties to be behind the demonstrations. Despite the shooting and killing of unarmed civilians allegedly by the security forces, the findings publicised that citizens barricaded roads, burnt down police camps and some even beat up the police officers.

Two of the key informants condemned an increase in the circulation of abusive and hatred messages on this particular period by people who were countering the protest. One of the key informants envisaged that:

> Personally, I was verbally abused as I received insulting messages on WhatsApp mainly from people who were against the protest which was people motivated as the only dream that was meant to save the nation from economic comatose. Messages like; 'you people are like dogs; you think the nation is given for free. Zimbabwe was brought through the spilt blood.

From the data presented above, the study provided that the residents of Hwange were aware of what led to the January 2019 protest and about the protest itself. On the same note, the study found that people were protesting against the rise of fuel price that contributed to the suffering of the general populace. These views were in line with the submissions made by Mare (2020).

The participants were first probed about the media (for instance, newspapers, radio, and television, among others) that the residents consumed in the study area. The responses indicated that the residents used different media such as broadcast, print and online media such as televisions, radios, newspapers and social media applications that include WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube among others. Regardless of the residents getting news updates through the aforementioned media, a number of participants bemoaned the limited Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation television and radio transmissions. An academic ascertained that:

> The locals get updates through vast media but encounter limited ZBC transmission which is only accessible when subscribed on DSTV. Thanks for the technological advancement that led to the generation of social media mainly WhatsApp and Facebook that we use together with international channels.

The study found that a number of newly employed mine workers did not own television and radio sets and these survived through social media applications such as Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and SMS to get news stories from *Kukurigo, The Chronicle and The Herald.* While social media was considered to be most utilised, a private radio broadcast - Studio 7 offered a crucial service to update the residents over the radio and social media platforms. Though the respondents used social media to get news and other updates, they optionally tuned to mainstream media to verify the authenticity of the messages broadcasted on the social platforms. Thus, the study premised that social media and their applications were key communication tools that residents in Hwange used to get news updates and hence their utilisation in this particular protest.

The participants were asked about their main source of information during the protest. They made numerous submissions with most of them basing on media particularly Email, Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook and YouTube, newspaper and internet, television, grapevine and radio. Although the first information about the protest was received on WhatsApp, most respondents revealed that mobile phones acted less, as social applications were jammed. It is from this suggestion that a limited number of participants argued that television played a pivotal role in spreading information pertaining to the protests. To sustain the claim, one of the participants subscribed that:

> Television played a pivotal role in spreading information pertaining to the protests as the mobiles phones acted or used less to disseminate information pertaining to the protest since other applications were stopped.

Considering the above findings, other participants socialised that they tuned in to international television channels such as British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), South Africa Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), France 24, and Al Jazeera, among others as their source of information pertaining to protest. For this particular phenomenon, Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation television channel was criticized for its selective broadcast about protest. While there were various media outlets through which the citizens established their social interactions and connectivity, the study premises that social media presented as the enabler and the main source of information that people in Hwange mainly utilised during the protest. Hence, the study premises that Hwange residents had various media (both online and mainstream) to get informed about the protest and that could be possible to lure them to possibly protest.

These findings were consistent with those of Chitanana (2020), Hove and Chenzi (2020), Mungwari and Ndhlebe (2019) and Gukurume (2017) who noted that social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube in Zimbabwe have become a beacon to provide a discursive space for citizens to express their problems and to challenge the unrestrained behavior of the government, which is symbolised by abuse of human rights, bad governance and rampant corruption. Therefore, it can be ascertained that social media particularly in this study WhatsApp played a key role as a powerful source of information as individuals used the application to mobilise for a protest in Hwange, got informed about what was happening in other areas and even got updates of the protest in Hwange community.

However, the majority of the Hwange residents connoted about incoherent statements that were received pertaining to the protest. While few blamed opposition political parties for instituting the protest, most respondents from Lwendulu maintained that they first received a video where the president announced an increase in fuel and what followed were castigations and aspersions on different social media walls debating on the catastrophes of such pronouncements would bring. On *SABC* channel uploaded on YouTube, president is heard saying that:

> *... the government has today decided on the following corrective measures; ... with effect from midnight tonight, the fuel pump price of $3.11 per litre for diesel and $3.31 for petrol will come into effect...*

In spite of the above, the respondents argued that they received a video that was dispersed on the 13th of January 2019 by ZCTU President marshaling people to stay home and not to go to work as a way to protest against the decision by

government to increase the fuel price amid the soaring economy. To mobilise the protestors, ZCTU shared a video that was posted on various social media platforms with the following statement:

> *… and we are now calling for a three day stay away Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday and we meet on Thursday and look at other forms of action including demonstration, including sit ins in cities and government places and we make a clear message to the government that we are overburdened and we cannot carry on this anymore…*

Having heeded to the call, the respondents clearly stated that they saw images and video clips of people who were looting, burning shops and a fuel station and barricaded roads. They also pointed out one video where people in the neighbourhood of Bulawayo said; *'thatha okukwanisayo mama'* (Mother, carry what you can manage) as the woman struggled to roll a trolley full of groceries. This study concur with Mungwari and Ndhebele (2019:286) conclusion that "the posting of videos and photographs on social media gave people news as the events unfolded giving less room for the spinning of state controlled media".

The study revealed that Hwange residents created a WhatsApp group coded 'Hwange-Shutdown Zimbabwe'. From the key informants, the study argued that the local denizens used individual links to get information on what was obtaining on ground, spread information confirming the protest timetable, venue and centrally for mobilisation. It is from the highlighted that the respondents equivocally stated that social media empowered the residents to converge at the rank (Lwendulu, number 1 rank) to demonstrate against government decision to hike fuel price. In support of the indicated, one respondent argued that:

> *WhatsApp groups were created to plan and organise protests. The planning highlighted the times and date to start e (the) protest. Most of these groups were created by political activists to coordinate the protest and every information on how the protest would be executed was disseminated.*

Another resident debated that:

> *The interception of WhatsApp was a non-event to the citizens. The convergence of the internet was and remains a booster to innovation, people reverted to VPN to reorganise, and restrategise on the protest.*

The respondents asserted that the government intercepted social media platforms mainly WhatsApp before ordering communication service providers (Econet, Telone and Telecel) to shut down the internet.

The study examined the participants' opinion on the contributions of social media in the mediation of 14th to 16th January 2019 protest. Social media was said to be a crucial source of information concerning the protest that happened in Hwange community. Others concurred that social media catalysed the mobilisation of the citizens not only in Hwange but also in major cities as they acted swiftly to the call that triggered civil turbulence. The respondents amplified that people dominated the virtual space to influence others within their links to join the protest. These results were in tandem with those established during interviews. Nonetheless, an insignificant number of respondents opposed the view that social media escalated the protest but attributed that people took advantage of a politically polarised situation and political difference to protest.

From the inquiry, the study revealed that social media greatly influenced and motivated the residents to protest until their cahiers or grievances were solved. Although social media are asserted to be powerful to escalate conflict, it is argued that social media thrive due to already seething polarized political situation and the alienated nature of the civil society organisations that create limited sustainability to mobilise for conflict de-escalation. Further results showed that social media offered a battle zone to deliberate and vent hatred to those who had a different view. These claims were however dismissed that a "revolution cannot be tweeted" (as noted Gladwell, 2010). Arguably, the reaction by the government to shut down the internet shows the power behind social media and however bequeathed citizens to find strategies to navigate through such restrictions and controls of democratic space with ease.

Conclusions

The study concluded that the increase in fuel price influenced people of Hwange to protest during the January 2019 protest that happened across the nation. Although there were varied opinions of what constituted social media, this study concluded that social media are a communication tool or handy weapon that offers the marginalised voice or counter publics a space to strategically communicate, plan and mobilise for a cause that fosters conflict transformation in Zimbabwe. Furthermore, the study ascertained that social media application particularly WhatsApp played a crucial role as a powerful source of information of getting updates around the country and also in Hwange and to mobilise for a protest in this community.

Additionally, the study determined that the mobilisation for a protest was done and shared through the use of images, videos, text and audios posted on various social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and so forth. Besides, the study further asserted that atrocious videos and images dispersed within the varied social media platforms, groupings and walls encouraged Hwange residents to mobilise for a protest and for them to engage into a protest. While other mainstream media were used, the study concluded that WhatsApp among other the general populace across the country as they mobilised for a protest. Further, conclusions were made that social media were used as a weaponry by the protestors to advocate and demand accountability, restoration of human dignity and human rights and good governance from the corrupt government. In doing so, the study established that activists and organisers often posted a video and pictorials for mobilisation. Premising from the indicated, the study determined that the use of videos, images, text and audios through social media have the potential to influence and escalate conflicts in Zimbabwe.

The study argued that the availability of internet and surge of social media offer the citizenry the ability to bypass restrictive media regulations and domination of media production. Despite the various debates on the influence social media have in protests, the study premised that the social applications have serious influence in revolutions despite political, impermeable and impermissible security situation in the country.

The study recommends that:

- There is need to train local residents at community level and continuously familiarise them on peace building initiatives so that they positively and constructively utilise social media and their applications to strategically communicate, plan and mobilise for a cause that foster conflict transformation and for socio-economic emancipation the community and Zimbabwe at large.
- The political players, public intellectuals, activists and civil society organisations must use social media as platforms to dialogue hence the need for constructive debates and engage in civility despite political affiliation and personal differences, to campaign for peace not hatred and to educate social values not antagonise as measure to transform mediatised conflicts into peace.
- Policy makers at national level must institute appropriate legal frameworks that ensure that social media are put to good use and become a channel through which the citizens enjoy their freedoms of expression, media, and access to information.
- The legislators or lawmakers must re-align some sections of the acts and repeal the draconic laws and sections to offer media plurality, neutrality and freedom of expression and after expression to media institutions and journalists.
- The Government of Zimbabwe to offer training to the broader citizenry that enhances responsible reporting and to offer heightened strategies to put to good use of social media to avoid dissemination of graphic videos and images that are disseminated as a result of an increase of citizen journalism.

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