

Review of: "Animation and YouTube as Alternative and Counterhegemonic Digital Public Sphere in Zimbabwe"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

This article is an interesting insight into a now neglected set of issues relating to Zimbabwean politics. Where considerable media attention was given to the plight of democracy in Zimbabwe at the height of Mugabe's farm seizures some 20 years ago, when its perceived relevance to Western audiences dissipated, so did media attention.

This paper seeks to turn attention to the continued struggles to assert democratic pluralism on the political system effectively through the prism of counter-hegemonic media representations, in particular animated cartoons on YouTube.

Cartoons have long been a staple of counter-hegemonic narratives, often using the grotesque and parody alongside more direct critiques to challenge dominant narratives. This research seeks to demonstrate how such methods are employed in a somewhat authoritarian mediascape to challenge largely statist, or at least dominant, political messages.

While in 2002 the world's broadcast media and press raised awareness of the Zanu-PF's growing authoritarianism to the outside world, in many respects such messages were more difficult to publicise internally. Today, however, internet platforms allow communications to take place outside the sphere of state-controlled communication. It is in this context that the present research was undertaken.

The research is somewhat weakened in this case by a lack of context of the political and social situation in Zimbabwe, and especially in relation to the Zimbabwean media. A better contextualisation would have helped non-Zimbabwean audiences understand the significance of cartoons published on YouTube as a source of counter-narrative – i.e. it would have given a richer explanation of what the cartoons are countering, and how significant that is.

The research makes reference to the research subject – YouTube cartoons – as dialogic. Yet there is little evidence that *dialogue* is taking place here. Such an omission makes it somewhat more difficult to apply a dialogical analysis to the research subject.

Combining these two criticisms we can immediately see how, say, presenting Subject A (dominant media) might be understood as monological therefore serve dominant power nexus, is contrasted with a subordinate or alternative communicative nexus (Subject B) that presents a more dialogical counter-narrative that enhances the democratic range of media representations.

Similarly, if the animations are to be understood as more dialogical, then there ought to be analysis that demonstrates this. Accordingly, more detailed audience analysis would be welcome. In the first instance a comparison of the audiences

of Subject A and of Subject B would be necessary. Thereafter an analysis of audience interaction in both research subjects (or even only Subject B) would make the value of the cartoons more apparent. Elements of such research might include analysis of YouTube comments, social media sharing and interaction and so on.

In part this would make the research richer because would take it on the path of attending to action, a necessary element in a vibrant, dialogical public sphere. It is this aspect of public spheres that perhaps gets less attention as the concept has been used and abuse in communication studies. To go back to the formulations of Hannah Arendt, that Habermas (with whom the concept of the public sphere is so often associated) was in no small part attentive to, public spheres are part of the *vita activa* rather than the *vita contemplativa*. To put it crudely, in *The Human Condition* Arendt effectively distinguished an active public and a passive public. Such a distinction can also be seen in passive media consumption and active media production. Here the *dialogical action* part is missing.

That said, the YouTube cartoons are indeed well set in the overall media landscape, to which they add greater diversity, alternative positions, and criticism. In this sense, the research makes solid contributions to the understanding of resistant messages in this medium and how it is used to create greater plurality in the mediascape – although this cannot be very effectively measured without a prior account of the general Zimbabwean mediascape.

The research accounts for particular elements of the cartoons as forms of resistance, focusing on the use of “vulgarity” as a form of resistance. Here vulgarity is well-contextualised and set in the tradition of alternative media and alternative politics. Some more contextualisation and theorisation, perhaps using Bakhtin, would have been useful to explain, rather than describe, why this is significant in the context of the argument of the research.

More to the point, without this contextualisation and explanation, the research missteps somewhat in its understanding of what might be considered “subaltern”. This is particularly evident when junior officers are aligned with the subaltern – such as when their grievances are muted by the military. In the first instance, without more elaboration of the role and significance of the military in Zimbabwe, it is difficult to understand the ascription of “subaltern” as anything other than an assertion. Thereafter it is difficult to understand the significance of that assertion. Are the junior officers a likely source of revolutionary activity? Are they a source of resistance? Perhaps most importantly, as “subaltern” as a concept essentially came from Gramsci, and notably developed by Edward Said, it is not clear how junior officers (as agents of state violence) could be considered to be marginalised, or rather marginalised in what context – *within* the military or as a representative class or grouping in society at large?

In this sense we can return to the initial criticisms – the lack of context of the mediascape and then the lack of contextualisation of the *agents* (in this case junior officers) lends itself to description rather than substantive analysis.

Overall, the contribution to knowledge of the situation in Zimbabwe, and the identification of practices of resistant media are important and welcome. Indeed, this short review has offered some suggestions for how this research can be further developed to enhance its analytical value.

