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

Teresa Harrison[1]

1 State University of New York at Albany

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This is an interesting effort to apply concepts related to the "public sphere" to oppositional discourse expressed in an animation series available to Zimbabweans through social media, specifically YouTube. I think the effort achieves success is demonstrating some of the ways that the animation expresses resistance to a corrupt regime supported by the military in Zimbabwe. However, I also think that the authors' use of the concepts such as "public sphere," "digital public sphere" and "digital counter public sphere" needs to rest on a foundation of theory underlying these concepts, which is subsequently applied to the animation sequences selected for analysis.

There is no descriptive review of scholarship related to "public sphere" in this manuscript. Indeed, the manuscript never defines the "public sphere" and never presents a set of characteristics that are regarded as essential to a "public sphere." This is a problem because a central claim in the manuscript is that the creators of the social media animations that critique the existing regime are themselves anti-democratic because they fail to acknowledge and represent that there are other political parties in Zimbabwe that also express and promote democratic aspirations. This raises the question of whether the concept of a public sphere includes the requirement or preference that actors in the public sphere must represent interests and groups other than their own. This is something that the authors should establish early in the paper if they want to accuse the animator of undue pro-MDC bias and anti-democratic practices.

But there is also some confusion in my mind about what phenomenon should be represented as a public sphere. The authors state: "This research conceptualizes the animation series as a public sphere" (page 2) and then go on to point out that this would actually be a "counter public sphere." I think the term "counter public sphere" also requires definition and description. What are the essential components of a counter public sphere and how does that relate to the animation series studied? Perhaps all the animators really mean to do is express their resistance to the oppression of the current regime and offer their own political alternative. Perhaps other democratically oriented parties need to create media vehicles (animations?) to represent their own voices?

Later the authors use the term "digital public sphere" (see e.g., page 6) and "digital counter public sphere" (see e.g., page 9) to describe a media space in which there is pluralism and a recognition that different groups within a society will have different interests. The idea of a "digital" public sphere in which oppositional discourse takes place through many different voices makes more sense to me than viewing a single animation series as its own public sphere. Indeed this particular

animation series seems to me to be one voice within the Zimbabwean digital public sphere, and that easy entry to social media itself would seem to invite other voices to express their perspectives and interests. From there one might imagine that different democratically oriented political organizations can make efforts to interrogate their differences and find commonalities with each other, coming closer to what might be viewed as a public sphere in the context of social media.

In short, I suggest the authors present readers with theoretically based descriptions of their concepts, and then reconsider how they can be used to illuminate the meanings of the animation series. I noticed that many citations in the reference list do not actually appear in the manuscript, and many of these are citations that could be used to present a complex conceptual picture of the "public sphere" as it might be formulated within social media and represented through oppositional voices and resistance.

One other tendency I noticed was that , with some consistency, the authors appear to claim that they know what the intentions of the animators are, but present no evidence for these claims, apart from their own interpretation of the animation content. For example, on page 7, the authors state "The intention is to delegitimize other opposition parties…." That may be a possible *outcome* of the content, but the authors do not present evidence that establishes intentions here or where they describe other motives attributed to the creators of the animation.

Finally, in reading the manuscript, there are a number of stylistic and grammatical choices that I ask the authors to reconsider.

The authors refer consistently to "the" paper, which sounds odd (to me). I suggest using the phrase "this paper" to make a more unambiguous reference to the manuscript currently being read.

Although the manuscript is generally well written, there are several points in the manuscript where errors in grammar, sentences lacking words, and other text problems caused some confusion for me. For example, the authors refer to *Nyoka* and *Kunyepa*, italicizing the names but not the word "and" which lead me to believe that these are two animation series rather than one. Similarly on page 4, it looks like the authors mean to quote Curran, but have left off any quotation marks making it hard to know which parts of the sentence are directly quoted. I encourage the authors to use the services of an editor skilled in English grammar and diction.

I would also ask the authors to present their theory of public sphere and related concepts at the beginning of the paper (to establish a common frame of reference with readers) and then move systematically to make connections between the concepts and their analysis of the animation sequence.

I hope my comments are useful to the authors and wish them all the best in their continued work on this project.