

Research Article

Animation and YouTube as Alternative and Counterhegemonic Digital Public Sphere in Zimbabwe

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This research investigates the emergence of an alternative digital public sphere (DPS) in Zimbabwe, which has subsequently proven to be counterhegemonic. It analyses how democratic forces conspire and contest official state propaganda and assert themselves as viable counter publics. The study examines animation texts, its form and its use of covert and overt aesthetics as tools that helped critique and navigate a chaotic terrain during the 'crisis period' in which the state censored critical or oppositional art and elite interests hijacked other forms of critical art and alternative media. The study argues that the DPS has promoted alternative discourses to those of the official public sphere. While the Subaltern counter publics have used alternative digital public spaces to question the official consensus, they have instead emerged as undemocratic platforms promoting and perpetuating the same hate and binary narratives that it accuses the state of proliferating.

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Introduction

Since the turn of the new millennium, state media in Zimbabwe has exclusively functioned as a purveyor of state propaganda. Dissenting voices had to look for alternative media platforms. With the country operating one television station since independence, there has been an incessant need for alternative audiovisual platforms. This lacuna has been filled up by social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter Instagram and WhatsApp. The uptake and use of social media has increased tremendously with the emergence of networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube amongst other platforms (Mhiripiri and Mutsvairo, 2013). What cannot be disputed is the

interconnectedness of people from various corners of the world, who discuss and share information on these platforms. Chatora (2012) further argues that social media has facilitated the sharing and expression of diverse opinions within the online communities. The same social media has been used as counter discourse in Zimbabwe due to the hostility and rigidity of mainstream media. These platforms offer a distinct platform unmanned and unregulated by the state (Gambiza 2020). Moyo (2020) notes that social media has become the same space that the government has its eyes on although it faces dilemmas. It is in this context that media researchers have examined the ways in which digital platforms have been creatively used to expand political participation (Margetts, 2018). Others have looked at the emergent phenomenon of social media dissidence” (cf. Matsilele, 2019), while others have focused on the political uses of memes (cf. Kasiyamhuru, 2019). A significant corpus of literature on social media in the Zimbabwean context, for instance, has previously focused on how youths make use of social media platforms for political activism (Mare, 2017). On the other hand, a growing body of scholarship has also focused on political parties in Zimbabwe make use of social media platforms during national elections (Gukurume, 2017). The nexus between social media and propaganda reflects a gap in the aforementioned literature.

The paper investigates the use of these platforms in countering state propaganda by non-state actors. The paper examines selected animation texts as resistance and counter hegemonic propaganda against the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) and state media hegemony. Raby (2005: 156) defines resistance as oppositional acts to dominance. Raby further contends that oppositional acts are often suppressed as subordinates regulate their anger towards the powerful, resulting in covert forms of resistance which are often elusive to the researcher. This article adopts this typology of resistance to study the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) resistance to ZANU PF hegemony through the use of digital media platforms. The paper argues that political animations diverge from print media political cartoons in terms of visual style, but not function. Thus animation has emerged as a vehicle that exploits both the cartoonist's customary drawing skills as well as the new-media affordances of sound and motion.

A cartoon is a form of two- dimensional illustrated visual art form. The word cartoon, from the (*Italian "cartone"* or Dutch word "*Aa/Yo/?*" meaning strong, heavy paper or pasteboard (Naqvi, 2012). While the specific definition has changed over times, modern usage refers to a typically non-realistic or semi realistic drawing or painting intended for satire and humor. The term originated in the middle ages and first described as a preparatory drawing for a piece of art such as painting, fresco, tapestry,

or stained glass window. In the 19th century, it came to refer to humorous illustrations in magazines, and newspaper, and in the early 20th century and onward it referred to comic strips and animated films (Naqvi, 2012). Contrary to the common perception that associates the art with children, cartooning is a powerful communication tool, a sharp weapon to ridicule the unjust and a platform to mold public opinion, apart from creating good humor using the combination of wit, satire, and punch. The paper uses seven episodes of *Nyoka* and *Kunyepa* to analyze animation as a purveyor of counter hegemonic propaganda and a form of digital counter public sphere. The animation series aired on YouTube prior to the 2013 general elections. The series has a combined viewership of over 300 000. These texts have deliberately been selected, as they are amenable to an analysis of digital counter hegemonic propaganda. This research conceptualizes the animation series as a public sphere. Whereas the traditional application of this concept has been confined to deliberations that take place on social media during and after viewership, this paper advances the notion that the world of the animation itself represents a category of a public sphere which has received scant academic attention. As characters perform and deliberate on issues that deal with political issues, they automatically create a primary digital counter public sphere, which is simultaneously reflective of other subaltern public spheres in the world beyond social media. The analysis of counter hegemonic propaganda in this manner may result in new and reconfiguration of digital counter publics in terms of their potential strengths and weaknesses in articulating opposition resistance. In addition, this study looks at how dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by texts in the social and political context.

Background and synopsis

Nyoka and *Kunyepa* are a caricature of Zimbabwean Central Intelligence Officers (CIOs)¹. They have orders from President Robert Mugabe, the commander of the Zimbabwe defense forces General Chiwenga² to do ‘everything possible’ to prevent free & fair elections from taking place. The two CIO operatives are given heinous orders through cellphone calls from General Chiwenga who gets his orders directly from president Robert Mugabe. The series mainly features Robert Mugabe, Chiwenga, Grace Mugabe and other senior government officials. The animation series was screened on YouTube prior to the 2013 elections which pitted longtime fierce rivals Robert Mugabe representing the ruling party ZANU PF and Morgan Tsvangirai of the MDC. Each episode commences with the two characters (*Nyoka* and *Kunyepa*) executing different orders and witnessing how the public is responding to the

unfolding political mismanagement. The two are constantly seen talking to General Chiwenga whom they mention by name through cellphone calls. When the series premiered the commander of the Zimbabwe defense forces was the current vice President Constantine Chiwenga and architect of the 2017 coup that toppled the late president Robert Mugabe. By representing real people with fictional characters, this satirical format allows criticism and mockery of both the imaginary political elite and existing social order.

The animation reveals how the 2013 elections are to be rigged in favor of President Robert Mugabe. It also delves into other sensitive issues such as the involvement of the military in election matters, judicial capture and Mugabe's health. Most importantly the series constructs the MDC as the most popular and widely supported political party. The paper demonstrates the implications of a biased and binary counter public sphere that the animation ushers in. On another level the animation not only represents a discursive form for legitimating the MDC, but a situation is created where preferential meanings about democracy, militarization of the state and election rigging can emerge.

Monopolizing democracy

Despite it being something of a cliché, it is true that in contexts like Zimbabwe with restricted media spaces, social media plays a key role in democratising public discourse, expanding sources of information and enabling the enjoyment of inalienable rights as espoused in the 2013 Constitution (Mare, 2018, Gambiza 2020). One of the central concerns of the animation series under study is the exclusive treatment of the MDC as the credible and sole democratic political party in Zimbabwe. In this section the paper discusses how the animation deals with the MDC's threat to the ruling party's hegemony, engendering the opposition as the only viable counter hegemony. Essentially, the animation's topical issue is the relationship between the state and the MDC, with the later given favorable frames. In the seven episodes flighted on YouTube there is an incessant and sustained visualization of the MDC as the only credible opposition in Zimbabwe. The selective framing of the MDC is sustained throughout all the episodes in order to legitimize its quest to defeat ZANU PF in the forthcoming elections. This is done through creation of legitimizing myths with regards to the supposed popularity of the party.

In one of the scenes Nyoka and Kunyepa witness an election registration center where prospective voters are queuing to register for the 2013 presidential elections. Surprisingly there are two queues one for the MDC and the other for ZANU PF supporters. As seen in figure 1, the queue with MDC voters is

oversubscribed. However the ZANU PF registration center is deserted. Whilst it cannot be disputed that the MDC has dominated the urban vote since its formation, it would be an exaggeration to completely dismiss ZANU PF as a serious threat as the party has gained traction winning some seats in the past elections. It should be noted as well that ZANU PF and the MDC despite dominating the electoral space, are not the only players. As such there seems to be a deliberate exclusion of other political parties from the animation's public sphere. This uneven distribution of power works only to serve polarization and propaganda. At this point of the animation, the cartoonist's creative agency comes to the fore where they have re-contextualized the prevailing media polarization, reversing the framing of the ruling party's hegemony.

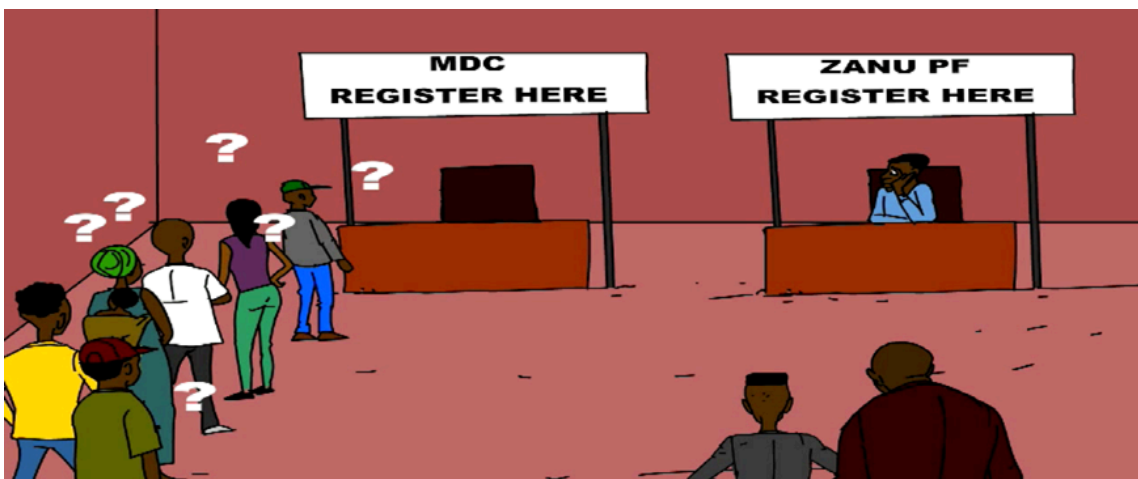


Figure 1. Voter registration

Whilst the animation seeks to construct and affirm the MDC's hegemonic endeavor, it does so at the expense of democracy. Consequently democracy becomes a monopoly for the MDC, other opposition political parties are discredited. Curran (1996, 53) encourages diversity and pluralism of engagement amongst classes which he views as [t] he communication of conflicting discourses which encourages various individual members of these groups to make sense of their lived experiences and their place in society as part of evaluating where their self-interest, and the wider interest of society lies. Instead of creating a public sphere that creates a binary appreciation of socio-political realities, Curran proposes one in which oppositional groups are given equal opportunities to freely express their interests and views whilst taking cognizance of the interests of other classes and groups. This helps to prevent the public sphere from creating oppressive democracy through dictatorship of other classes. He helps

prevent the MDC from thinking that they are without blemish or that their ideas need no moderation and refinement from other classes. Curran adds that:

Pluralism makes visible multiple definitions of collective interest, rather than proclaims of a single “natural interest” that can mask or universalize a dominant class of interest. It allows for free ranging discussion which enables structures that appear too natural... to be questioned, and which enables people to challenge prevailing patterns of thought which legitimate their subordination. It also facilitates the exploration of self to others as a way of defining and exposing objective identity. (1996, 57)

This reading is crucial because it helps one to understand that any critique of despotism, oppression and marginalization must not leave other voices outside the domain of critical interrogation whilst providing the narrative that justifies social movement demands (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996). Papacharissi (2010) asserts that there is a limitation to the digital public sphere because unmediated public debates on social media are now being run by selfish people. On the other hand, Fuchs (2011) contends that the democratizing potential of social media platforms is now being mediated by trolls and bots, who have a leading role in spreading fake news.

In another episode, an Israeli Nikuv³ agent is presenting the company’s strategy on how it is going to rig the upcoming elections in favor of the incumbent ZANU PF. Interestingly the first strategy is aimed at the MDC, whilst the rest are directed at different sectors and institutions. The cartoonists single out the MDC as the biggest threat to ZANU PF by strategically placing it first on the election rigging strategy. The strategy is presented as follows:

1. 1 million MDC voters declared dead or deleted from the voters role
2. Sabotaged mobile registration in rural areas
3. Registered more than 1 million deceased ZANU PF supporters
4. Ensured MDC aligned security personnel were unable to cast their votes (Nyoka and Kunyepa ep 3)

According to Russell:

The aim is to provoke and agitate the audience emotionally in order to achieve an enthymematic engagement with the viewer through the strategic selection and

arrangement of imagery that introduces, explores and contextualizes social and political constructs and events by way of easily recognized and processed metaphors. (2009; 26)

In this regard Hartley (1988:5) argues that the media and in particular social media against the background of the so-called consensus ideal, only support the social, economic and political, interests of one group at the cost of another group. The ability and the need, for media to abide by its principles such as to act independently, seek truth and to minimize harm is compromised (Oosthuizen, 2014).” Thus by positioning of the MDC as the single threat to ZANU PF hegemony the cartoonists aim to gain emotional support from digital public sphere participants. In turn the audience is coerced to support it as the most outstanding movement with the possibility of ousting ZANU PF out of power. Consequently the role of other political parties’ and civic society movements is downplayed. Whilst it is critical that public spheres that engender interests of disadvantaged groups be created, there is a need to ensure that the disadvantaged groups do not end up thinking that their interests are superior (Curran 1996). There is a necessity, in Curran’s view, to prevent the disadvantaged groups from believing that they are more significant and important than any other classes in society. Therefore the digital public sphere should not just be a space for deliberating oppositional and contestatory views but also a place for self-interrogation and introspection (Kelvin 2014).

Another example that illustrates the cartoonist’s fixation with the MDC is when Nyoka and Kunyepa are driving around town and they come across an MDC demonstration with all the party supporters wearing their party regalia (red outfits). One of the placards is written *Chinja*, loosely translated as ‘change’, a word from the MDC Slogan *Chinja Maitiro*– ‘Change your way of doing things’. The demonstrators are all dressed in red, an unrealistic scenario in any given demonstration is created by the animators. The aim of the animation is clearly to invisibilize other parties and visualize the MDC’s quest for power. The one dominant gaze permitted on social media, instead of benefiting from such monopoly, only gets rewarded with texts that lack nuance. Such a lack of nuance results, indeed, in dangerous texts that are unable to call things by their names. The failure to call things by their names is, of course, a euphemism for deceitfulness or outright propaganda.

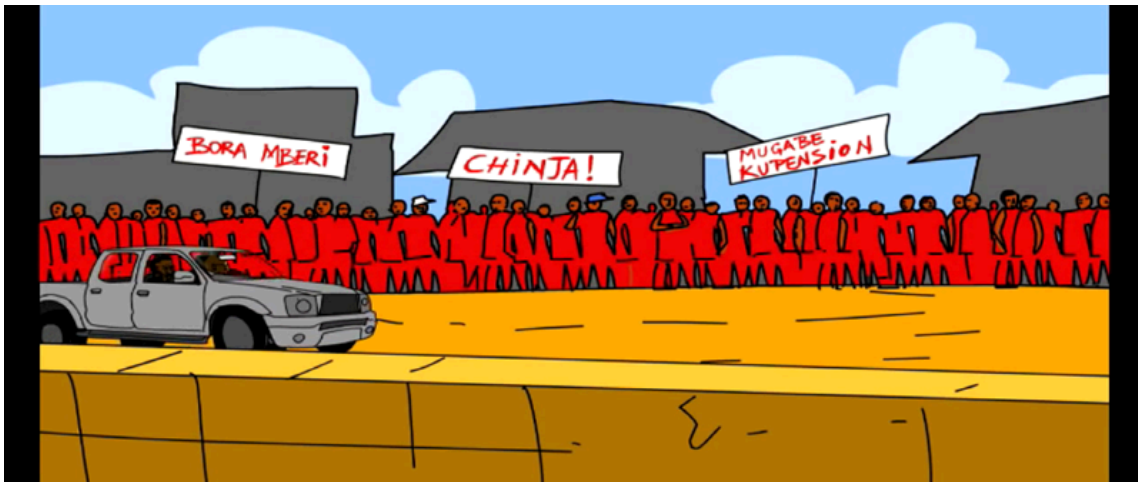


Figure 2. MDC demonstration

This is also an attempt to make unsubstantiated information concerning the popularity of the MDC appear authentic. The intention is to delegitimize other opposition parties, ZANU PF and the electoral process, insinuating that the MDC is the most viable and outstanding opposition party worthy to take over the reins of power. This betrays a hegemonic tendency for homogenizing and patronizing the public. According to Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes and Sasson (1992):

We walk around with media-generated images of the world, using them to construct meaning about political and social issues. The lens through which we receive these images is not neutral but evinces the power and point of view of the political and economic elites who operate and focus it. And the special genius of this system is to make the whole process seem so normal and natural that the very art of social construction is invisible. (p. 374).

Gamson et al. (1992) point out that while images are reproductions, they could also be “mental pictures” of something not real or not present (Gamson et al., 1992, p. 374). While the image makers might not do it intentionally, images often tell the readers how to interpret the world and are a lot of time teachers of values, ideologies and beliefs (Gamson et al. 1992). In other words, images can affect readers’ points of view on events or people. Indeed, the imaging and framing of the MDC in this way seems to constitute a specific strategic device deployed by the artists for purposes of sending and imbedding messages into the collective national psyche, and even into the unconscious. This paper points out that before the opposition protests about systems of power, they must also interrogate

themselves because constraints to democracy are inherent in any individual and at every level. On the other hand, the one-sidedness of the animation has the effect of making counter hegemonic propaganda texts strong on rhetoric, but weak on ideology, content, technique and formal appeal. Thus online texts do not always follow the high ideals set for deliberative democracy. Speech is not always so rational, tolerance toward those who hold opposing views is at times wanting, and the forms of interaction are not always so civil (Wilhelm, 2000).

Denouncing militarization of politics

The involvement of the military in civilian affairs such as elections has been a major source of contestation between the MDC and the ruling party. In the run up to the 2008 harmonized elections, several army generals declared that they would not salute those without liberation war credential giving a major blow to the opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai who did not participate in the liberation war. The army has been accused of tilting the votes in favor of the ruling party. This is validated by Rupiya (2004) who argues that the current crisis in Zimbabwe is characterized by the reciprocal phenomena of the politicization of the military and the militarization of politics.

Other analysts have linked militarization to high levels of violence and ‘thievery’ in the parliamentary elections held in June 2000, presidential polls held in March 2002 and in the 2008 June presidential run-off. Chitiyo (2003) notes that the 2002 presidential elections were run as a military operation. According to Tendi and Alexander (2009), the 2008 presidential run-off went a long way toward laying bare the deeply problematic nature of both the liberation–struggle logic and the militarized means by which Zanu-pf sustains its claims to power. What is apparent here is that the Zimbabwean crisis has been sustained and propelled by the involvement of the military in civilian affairs. While the military has an important role to play in national politics as well as the formulation of different internal and external policies, their involvement in issues to do with the civilian leadership of the state should be minimized in order to give the citizens open room for free choice. In line with this observation, this section deals with the cartoonist’s portrayal of the military interests in civilian matters such as elections and the possible divisions in army circles.

In the second episode of the series, the cartoonists also take an interesting gaze on the involvement of the military in civilian affairs. In the scene below (Figure 3), Nyoka and Kunyepa witness junior soldiers spraying graffiti on a wall, the graffiti reads *Chiwenga Chimbuzi Chiripi* (translated Chiwenga where is the toilet). Upon noticing this, Kunyepa comments:

‘things are not looking good, Even the young soldiers are not happy my friend’.

The military-led ZANU PF government that came into power in 2017 after a military coup, frames social media as an “asymmetric threat” and as intent on “command and control” (Gambiza 2020:29). Because of fear, in Zimbabwe, it is unheard of for subordinates to challenge their superiors in public. Even if such a forum is available, free speech cannot be realized owing to constraining issues of hierarchy and protocol. The animation becomes a dialogical forum outside the knowledge of the authorities empowering even those who are afraid to speak, to speak without fear (Sampedro 2018).



Figure 3. Junior soldiers denouncing General Chiwenga

The above can be said to be satiric of the military state capture of government and the ruling party. The use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues is what can be termed as satire (Clark, 1991). Largely employing wit⁴ as a weapon and as a tool to draw attention to both particular and wider issues in society vices, satire is characterized by follies, abuses, and shortcomings which are held up to ridicule, ideally with the intent of shaming individuals, corporations, government or society itself, into improvement (Elliott, 2004). Contradictions among the military show a clear departure from the ZANU-PF imaginings of a cohesive nation-state and the centrality of debate in a democratic society.

The above image, demonstrates that vulgarity became a way of expressing anger over the manner in which the military meddled in civilian affairs. The use of vulgarity in a dispute is a testimony and sign of extreme anger. Mbembe (2001) contends that vulgarity is an expression of power. He further argues that the obscene is a necessary element of resistance to the dominant culture. He cites the Cameroon

and Togo examples, where the obscene and grotesque were used to deconstruct particular regimes of violence. Under the one-party state, citizens developed ways of separating words from their conventional meanings and using them in other senses. This humor must not only be taken as a form of crude and primitive culture, but rather it demonstrates power contestations in societies (Mbembe 2001). Ncube (2017) observes that ordinary people in Zimbabwe usually deploy vulgarity in popular culture sites such as football fandom to speak truth to power. This iconoclastic humor (analogous to Bakhtin's Rabelaisian laughter) 'visualizes' how the ordinary people see the glaring irrationality, preposterousness and vulgarity of their 'leadership.' Ideally, this demystifies the leadership's power and authority:

In transgressing taboos and constraints, people are stressing their preference for 'conviviality'; they unpack the *officialese* and its protective taboos and, often unwittingly, tear apart the gods that African autocrats aspire to be. (Mbembe 2001:23)

What is implied in figure 3 is that the junior officers are fed up with their leadership. The junior officers then are a representation of the subaltern whose grievances have been muted by the military. The junior officers therefore take over the public sphere to articulate in overt ways their grievances in full view of security agents. For this reason, the study points out that it is through the creation of alternative public spheres in subaltern spaces that people can talk about burning issues of the day without fear of previous history or repression. This is a significant factor in the development of democratic thought through social media. Fraser (1994:62) submits that subaltern counter publics are:

Parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn, permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interest and needs.

Hence, this paper explores how the subaltern invent and transform social media into a space for oppositional politics. It also explores how the transformation of social media into a discursive arena liberates the agency of subaltern voices. The issues that Nyoka and Kunyepa discuss are quite sensitive as they draw from Zimbabwe's sensitive political contestations.

According to Bernard Cohen (1963), the media may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about. In this way, digital counter public spheres increase the potential for participating in political debate

(Papacharissi, 2010), but most citizens consume rather than produce information (Curtice & Norris, 2004). The most politically active are already mobilized (Loader & Mercea, 2011, p. 5), but they can lead public opinion and influence their immediate circles (Norris & Curtice, 2008). Social media has created a virtual community of dissent that actively fostered counter-hegemonic discourses, hence affording the hitherto suppressed voices an audible voice against these governments (Gukurume, 2017; Morgan, 2018).

Conclusion

From the foregoing it has emerged that social networking websites, such as YouTube, offer users the opportunity to share user generated content and directly engage with others. This paper has noted that the 2013 election ushered in the use of social media for political campaign purposes in Zimbabwe. Although these sites are not exclusively political, within specific enclaves, political speech can take hold and flourish. On the other hand the filtration of one sided discourses has an effect of undermining the democratic intentions of the DPS. The paper illustrated the multiple meanings generated by different images from animated texts highlighting social media as a digital counter public sphere. The paper has demonstrated the limitations of the digital counter public sphere in articulating topical political issues. Through the effective use of less offensive public transcripts, animation and social media has resisted the state without attracting the wrath of the dominant, making it a unique platform of resistance and counter hegemonic propaganda. A highly repressive political environment gave impetus to subtle forms of protest, as players sought to negotiate their existence in the face of a well-oiled state machinery. The highly unstable political environment, characterized by ruthless acts towards opposition, was crucial in formulating cyber propaganda strategies that were favorable to subordinate groups. In certain circumstances, DPS can make a difference, but that their effect on the political-information system is gradual and cumulative. The paper concludes that, when socioeconomic crises, institutional degradation, and popular indignation coincide, the DPS can become a viable alternative platform for challenging hegemonic ideas and prompting structural transformations in the political arena.

Footnotes

¹ The Central Intelligence Organization otherwise known as the CIO is an arm of the Zimbabwe security sector whose line of work is inherently classified. For a very long time the organization and its

operations have ignited public debate and fueled speculation.

² Chiwenga is the former Commander of the Zimbabwe Defense forces and the current vice president. He is credited for carrying out the 2017 coup which toppled the late president Robert Mugabe. In this animation, he is referred to as *Zim 2*, second only to the President.

³ Nikuv is a Nikuv Intl. Projects, is an Israeli company managing voter lists & election results, accused of rigging vote to re-elect Mugabe, incumbent President with record of human rights abuses.

⁴ A message whose ingenuity or verbal skill or incongruity has the power to evoke laughter

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