

Social media uses and abuses in the production and dissemination of Covid 19 related messages in Zimbabwe: A case of WhatsApp Messenger

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ABSTRACT

With the spread of Covid 19 related information, so many conspiracy theories have resulted where most of these are widely circulated on social media. WhatsApp Messenger is one of the social networking sites where people depend on for information as this medium of communication is easy to acquire, to operate and that the internet bundles required to use the platform are quite affordable to many. It has been noticed that WhatsApp as an alternative channel that is interactive, inclusive and in multimedia form poses a threat to the right of citizens to be informed truthfully and accurately about the Covid 19 deadly pandemic. The WhatsApp platform has been heavily cited as a source of half-truths or totally misleading details about the cure and prevention of Covid 19. It is against this backdrop that this study sought to assess how the WhatsApp platform is used and misused by citizen journalists in the production and reception of messages related to Covid 19. A qualitative research methodology was used for the study as this allows for in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study. Interviews and Focus Group Discussions were used for data generation. Five (5) WhatsApp groups and twenty individuals were part of the data gathering process where the following were some of the questions asked in order to understand what messages they were exposed to or sharing on WhatsApp Messenger on Covid 19. What do you understand about Covid 19? What sort of messages are spread on WhatsApp about Covid 19? How do you think WhatsApp can be used in order to correctly inform people about Covid 19?

Key Words: Covid 19, Social Media, WhatsApp Messenger, Uses and Abuses.

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I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Rasmussen (2013) describes the representational public sphere as representing that which has never been presented in the traditional media. He further argues that the representational public sphere is inclusive as well as democratic and it is pioneered by the internet and other information and communication technologies (ICTs). According to Davis (2009), social networks such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Blogs, Twitter, and YouTube have transformed citizens into prosumers meaning that they can now take part in the production as well as the reception of media messages. Rasmussen (2013) argues that the internet is expanding freedom of speech, freedom of the media and freedom of association due to its virtual nature where people can discuss issues anywhere and at any time. McQuail (2010) defines public sphere as a space that provides a more open arena or forum for public debate, hence in this case the same can be said about WhatsApp Messenger. Elmer (2012) highlights that the internet has created important political space where people can now partake in political debates in a society.

Since the outbreak of the deadly pandemic Covid 19, social networking sites are awash with numerous messages from diverse sources. Some of these Covid 19 related messages intend to educate us on the symptoms and preventive methods, some are informing people on the number of those infected and those who have succumbed to the deadly pandemic Covid 19. There are also alarming messages that create fear and despondency in the country where people are misinformed about many factors such as who has passed on due to covid 19, what concoction to take in order to avoid fatalities among other misleading messages.

Some argue that new media makes news just like the old media by taking traditionally journalistic conflict based structure, as said by Meikles (2005), however it is important to note that in Zimbabwe the media be it private or public media follows an inverted pyramid style of newswriting whereas new technological tools such as WhatsApp platform pioneered by the internet and used even on mobile phones have un professional journalists who use a narrative style of newswriting.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

It is reasonable to note that although literature presented in this section identifies how social media has been used or abused, the cases are not representative of the African population as little has been written on how social media is used in Africa and in particular in Zimbabwe. It is important to note that, that which constitutes responsible use of social media as well as abusive use of social media is prone to different interpretations based on a number of factors. What constitutes abuse of social media from a government perspective is deemed responsible use of social media especially from a freedom of expression activist point of view and at times it is possible that there are no binary opposites as parties agree on a particular issue. Hall's encoding and decoding model with different ways of reading texts is useful to clarify ways through which people interpret a particular phenomenon.

Hall (1973) claims that in decoding texts there are three positions, firstly, the dominant/hegemonic position where an audience is operating inside a dominant code and they take the message as it is, secondly there is the negotiated position where an assessment is made by the audience for suitability of their condition, thirdly, the oppositional position which occurs where the consumers do not share the text's code and end up rejecting it because due to different backgrounds individuals have their own ways of decoding messages. Hall's model tends to over emphasise the power of the audience ignoring the power of the media as they disseminate purposeful messages to their audiences. Hall's model helps to clarify the issue under investigation on how social media use and abuse is determined by people from different backgrounds.

According to Paquette and Simmons (2010), the Obama administration encouraged the use of social media to interact with the government, Obama used social media during his presidential campaign to reach a large population. Obama advocated for the use of social media and this made it possible for his presidential campaign to be a success where even fundraising was made possible. The use of social media by the government presents a number of opportunities as stated by Bertot, Jaeger, Munson and Glaisyer, (2010) as follows; "democratic participation and engagement, co-production as well as crowdsourcing solutions and innovations." In Zimbabwe not much has been written on how politicians are using social media for developmental purposes as well as for perpetuating their ideologies, be it by the ruling party or the opposition parties, therefore this study fills in the gap.

As Mansell (2007) notes, technology is good, the users are the ones misusing it. Internet can be used for good purposes like education. The information revolution is more about gossip and disagreement than about gathering information. There is more news on the air but it is delivered piecemeal with little context.' (Rosenstiel and Kovach 1999).

A lot has been written in African and American scholarship on how social media is complementing traditional media in that what is not reported on in traditional media can be read or viewed on social media. Rasmussen (2013) describes the representational public sphere as representing that which has never been presented in the traditional media, he further argues that the representational public sphere is inclusive as well as democratic and it is pioneered by the internet and social media networks (Rasmussen,2013). Meikles (2005) says that the blog revolution means that the mainstream media can be replaced by self-regulating democracies of voices and the wisdom of the crowd. It is from this perspective that traditional news production is said to be dying.

In an information society, people are able to create, distribute and to manipulate information to suit them (Davis, 2009). Adorno (1991) noted that audiences are easily gullible unable to make meaningful interpretation of texts they consume. However with the advent of social media, audiences are now active constructors of messages. Osgood and Schramm therefore believe that information is exchanged not transmitted in a linear direction Kwaramba (2000), hence this is the case with social media. According to Davis (2009), social networks such as Facebook, Blogs, Twitter, and YouTube have transformed citizens into prosumers meaning that they can now take part in the production as well as the reception of media messages.

Bray (2007) says that it is not surprising that social media has its advantages and disadvantages as technology has always had its positives and negatives and has affected people's interactions in different ways. Social media has managed to increase its coverage of news due to its hypertextuality, use of multimedia and interactivity (Bray, 2007).

As noted by scholars like Roda and Rinke (2011), who researched on media ecologies during the Facebook revolution in Egypt, alternative media ecologies are oppositional and also have the possibility to increase participation. Social media challenges traditional media forcing them to open up to people to user generated content, (UGC). New media enhances citizen access to protest media ecologies in Africa as is the case on social media (Moyo, 2010). Social media are widely considered as crucial in bringing about social change in Africa(Ndlela,2009) through empowering citizens, opening up new opportunities for journalistic practice, and create new platforms for free expression and activism. Okello (2010) says 'We media' is said to be more democratic, interactive, inclusive and multimedia.

Zanamwe, Rupere and Kufandirimbwa (2013) focus on the use of social networking sites in higher education in Zimbabwe whereas this study is looking at how social media is used or abused by people in Zimbabwe thereby filling in the gap left by the scholars as little has been written on how social media is used in the Zimbabwean setting and why it needs to be regulated as well as the impact social media regulation has on freedom of expression. Zanamwe, Rupere and Kufandirimbwa can be applauded for managing to come up with a study on social media uses in Zimbabwe.

In Zimbabwe there are quite a number of cases where social media has been extensively used however the cases have not been fully explored by academics. Freedom of expression activists have shown their interests through upholding social networking sites such as FaceBook, Twitter and WhatsApp. For purposes of this research paper the researcher will dwell on how WhatsApp is used and misused in Zimbabwe during this Covid 19 era.

Theoretical Framework

The study was informed by the Public Sphere theory that mainly assisted in unpacking social media uses and abuses. The study uses the public sphere theory. Jurgen Habermas a German sociologist and philosopher propounded the public sphere theory which posits that citizens must freely discuss issues of importance in their lives and how media should work in a society. In so doing issues of transparency, credibility, truthfulness and reliability are compromised considering that anyone can partake in the communication process even in spreading falsehoods to the general populace on WhatsApp platforms as the main social medium for this study.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research methodology informed by a constructivist philosophy was used for this study. For data generation Focus Group Discussions and Interviews were conducted in order to understand the messages people consume or produce and disseminate on WhatsApp. Five (5) WhatsApp groups and 20 individuals were used for the data gathering process where the WhatsApp group had the following number of people each, 20, 22, 30, 19 and 16 individuals. These groups were those that the researcher belonged to so it was easier to get information from the participants that way. The 20 individuals were taken from the researcher's WhatsApp contacts. The same questions were asked both the group members and the individuals who were involved in the data generation process.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

An understanding of Covid 19 by the participants and messages they are exposed to on WhatsApp.

Participants showed a limited understanding of Covid 19 as they mentioned that there are different ways in which the disease has been described and it is very difficult for them to understand what exactly is Covid 19, some call it Covid 19, others refer to it as Coronavirus while others are now referring to it as a new Covid 19 variant. This poses a problem in the understanding of this deadly pandemic from just the definition of the disease. Participants noted that the vocabulary and expressions used in referring to Covid 19 seems to be expanding rapidly such that there is now a great concern regarding Covid 19 and this calls for strategies for educating the general populace about this pandemic and the media is envisaged to play a purposive role in demystifying Covid 19.

However it is important to note that there are some people who showed an understanding of Covid 19 who managed to briefly state that there was an outbreak in China, Wuhan, that became an epidemic and the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared it as a pandemic, then various measures were taken to contain the pandemic where those who had the virus were put on isolation centres and those who were likely to have the virus were recommended to be in quarantine all efforts to limit the transmission of the virus.

On symptoms associated with Covid 19 people are in a state of muddle in minds as they have been told several symptoms on WhatsApp such as coughing, sneezing, dizziness, headache. Basically if one has these symptoms the participants revealed that that particular person suffers from stigma yet it could just be a common cold symptom but because people have been socialized through WhatsApp that the symptoms are for one infected with Covid, it becomes a shame and traumatizing experience especially to the one with such symptoms.

Participants indicated that on WhatsApp they are exposed to messages to do with what can one do when they have or suspect that they have contacted the virus. Some have circulated on WhatsApp messages where they are encouraged to drink several concoctions that make it even difficult to understand what exactly they are supposed to take.

Information gathered from participants in this study clearly shows that people are in a state of confusion regarding Covid 19. They do not know what to do even when they are exposed to the so-called reliable sources such as WHO, hence there is need to regulate social media messages regarding Covid 19 especially those that come from WhatsApp Messenger.

Participants from the Interviews held via WhatsApp platform noted great concerns regarding the use of WhatsApp as the messages disseminated are full of misinformation and mistrust regarding Covid 19. They noted that it is difficult for the general populace to understand Covid 19 from construed messages by unreliable sources of information. The behaviour by people on WhatsApp leaves people with a lot of doubts and confusion and this even occurs when they get information from traditional media that are often regarded as trusted sources of information. Participants showed a high desire for information in tackling Covid 19 however constrained social media messages are doing more harm than good, hence they attribute this as an abusive way of using WhatsApp tool.

Chain messages on WhatsApp have been widely cited as fuelling more confusion and anger concerning Covid 19 information. These kind of messages will have been forwarded many times to several people and those who are gullible end up believing that there is an element of truth in what they are communicating.

People mentioned that the fake messages they are exposed to such as reports on WhatsApp on the number of those infected with Covid 19 as well as those who succumbed to Covid 19 are quite unbelievable and this is evidenced by a contrast between government official reports and social media reports. On social media it seems that people have given themselves a licence of saying whatever and however they want to say it, even those who might have died due to other illnesses are said to have passed on due to Covid 19, the participants gave examples of their relatives, some who died because of diabetes while other with high blood pressure who were reported on as having died from Covid 19 complications, an unethical way of reporting on WhatsApp.

The precautionary measures against Covid 19 that people have also been exposed to on WhatsApp are said to be misleading, participants noted that there are quite a number of potions they have been encouraged to drink which are bogus treatments and remedies. The messages even give people wrong symptoms associated with Covid 19. This misinformation is worrying as indicated by the participants. Some messages are said to be stipulating that there has been a development of a Covid 19 vaccine in Zimbabwe that is already being used in some parts of the country.

It is clear from the findings that WhatsApp is used as a tool for propagating misinformation and muddled public knowledge concerning the virus, Covid 19 in Zimbabwe. People are even afraid of taking the Covid 19 vaccine because of a lot of messages disseminated on WhatsApp concerning the side effects of the vaccine.

The other challenge that has been widely cited by the participants is that content is harder to police and often perceived as coming from a trusted source when shared by friends and family.

V. CONCLUSION

With the rise of Covid 19 related cases people need to be very cautious about what they consume on social media. Not everything shared on WhatsApp is authentic, there is need to rely on quite reputable sources of information such as the ministry websites and the World Health Organisation websites in order to get official verified information. The spread of Covid 19 fake news is worrisome and there is need to address this issue in order to ensure that people are informed correctly concerning this deadly pandemic. Exposure to fake messages, falsehoods, half-baked truths, untrustworthy and unreliable messages is a cause for concern among the general populace in Zimbabwe who most of them reside in the remote areas where they hardly get hold of official sources of information regarding Covid 19, hence their reliance on WhatsApp Messenger that has been highly cited as a misused platform spreading unreliable messages on Covid 19.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are some of the recommendations regarding covid 19 messages that people are exposed to on WhatsApp

- WhatsApp messenger just like any other social networking sites is not a reliable source of information hence it is important for citizen journalists to ensure that they rely on the official websites, media and organisations who have all the details pertaining Covid 19 as they are trusted sources.
- Since WhatsApp is one of the widely used social media application due to its low cost and less usage of data where almost everyone can buy the data bundles, people are encouraged to take note of user generated content that is misleading and be able to consume that which they deem to be useful and can work for them since not all information on WhatsApp is false.
- Posts with harmful misinformation about Covid 19 transmission and possible cures that have gone viral on WhatsApp must be closely monitored and such offenders disciplined.
- It is paramount to embrace social media as a tool for development not as a tool for destruction hence there is need to regulate WhatsApp for the sole purpose of informing and educating people about Covid 19.

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