ОНТОЛОГИЯ СТРАТЕГИЧЕСКОЙ КОММУНИКАЦИИ

Media, conflict and democratisation in Africa: Political communication by other means

H. Wasserman

University of Cape Town, South Africa,
Private Bag X3, Rondebosch, 7701, South Africa

The link between the media and democracy is often understood in the liberal-democratic tradition to be self-evident. However, the relationship between the media and democracy is often complicated, critiqued and varies from context to context. The relationship between the media and democracy in established democracies in the Global North is often taken as an example that has universal relevance, while the specifics of the South remains under-researched. This paper aims to provide an illustration of how the link between media and democracy is manifested in some African contexts, and how political communication takes a variety of forms in these settings, which may not always correspond to the dominant notions of political communication in the Global North. First, a brief background of democratization in Africa, as well as the media's role in relation to democratization processes, is provided. The paper then goes on to discuss the reasons why alternative forms of political communication have been emerging in Africa. Lastly, two examples of alternative types of political communication in Africa are given — firstly, the use of satire to critique hegemonic political power, and secondly, the use of alternative platforms to critique the mainstream media itself. Through these examples, the paper aims to illustrate why it is important to consider political communication on a theoretical level beyond the boundaries of established, liberal-democratic countries.

Keywords: media, democracy, political communication, African contexts.

Introduction

It is often presumed to be a universal truth that there is a strong link between media and democracy. This link, it is presumed, is manifested in similar ways around the world, with the predominant role for the media to be that of a monitor over power, with other roles being those of facilitator of dialogue, radical activist for change or collaborator with

the authorities [Christians et al. 2009]. However, the demand to study democracy beyond the boundaries of the Global North requires closer attention to exactly how those roles are enacted in specific settings where both the process of democratization as well as the attendant forms of political communication may take different forms. To theorize political communication beyond boundaries requires a study of the actually existing norms and practices in contexts of the Global South.

The links between mediatized politics and the deepening of democratic culture is not self-evident, automatic or generalizable, and are often simplified or exaggerated. The extent to which media may influence political culture depends on a variety of factors, ranging from the level of media saturation, type of media and the specific social and political dynamics of the context [Voltmer 2013: 12]. Central to the problem of the media-democracy link, therefore, is the erroneous assumption of universality. The existence of a variety of types of political communication, journalism and democratic models, makes it impossible to find a single yardstick with which to measure the relationship between media and democracy [Josephi 2013: 442]. Depending on the particular type of democracy, different normative expectations may be set for the media's role within such a democracy. [George 2013: 491] argues that although democratic values are accepted widely around the globe today, democracy may manifest itself differently and deviate from the ideal type along a spectrum. Expecting that democracies everywhere should conform to the same liberal model lest they be considered inferior, is an 'ethnocentric' assumption [George 2013: 492]. As [Stremlau & Iazzolino 2017: 5] argue, media systems reflect local norms and values and the relationship between politics and media is informed by 'local ideas and structures of power that define the degree of independence of the latter from the former and, more broadly, the way they influence one another'.

A note on methodology

This article is based on a summary of the main literature related to media and democratisation, as well as the democratization processes that have occurred in Africa since the 'second wave' of democracy in the 1990s. It does not follow a systematic content analysis, but rather provides examples from the African context to illustrate the argument.

Media and democracy in Africa

The democratization process is often described in terms of different stages, from authoritarianism to an established mature democracy. In this view [summarized by Voltmer 2013: 73–74], the process starts with liberalization, when the authoritarian regime starts opening up, either gradually or abruptly. This stage may include the relaxation of state control, ownership or censorship of the media. The next stage — often a tumultuous one marked by conflicts and contestations — is that of transition, when the demise of the old regime goes over into the construction of new institutions and the development of new ones. When a new constitution has been negotiated and elections held, the process of consolidation starts, in which the new institutions 'put down roots' [Voltmer 2013: 75] and the democratic culture is deepened.

The assumption that democratization progresses through linear, orderly phases, has received criticism for presenting a too neat and progressive picture [Voltmer 2013: 76]. Such criticism also seems valid when considering the democratization processes in Africa.

In the postcolonial era ushered in by Ghana's independence in 1957, political changes mostly took place by means of military coups that unseated authoritarian heads of state, one-party or military regimes [Joseph 1997: 367]. Various 'transition trajectories' [Cheeseman 2015: 93] can therefore be noted in African states, including transitions 'from above' (when the ruling party initiated reform, as in the case of Senegal and Tanzania), transitions 'from below' (when ruling parties democratized because of domestic and international pressure), and 'externally triggered transitions', where donors intervened to break the stalemate in negotiations between the ruling party and the opposition and demanded elections (e.g. in Angola, the DRC, Liberia and Sierra Leone). 'Negotiated transitions' occured where the deadlock between ruling party and opposition was resolved by both sides making compromises [Cheeseman 2015: 93–107].

Although democratisation became visible across the continent in the 1990s as part of the 'third wave of democracy' [Huntington 1991], sometimes referred to as a 'second independence' [Joseph 1997: 364], this wasn't a uniform process, but often resulted in hybrid regimes where democratic institutions and procedures combined with continued authoritarian tendencies in government [Vladisavljević 2015], neo-patrimonial networks [Stremlau & Iazzolino 2017] or representation by clans or ethnic groups in the state, and a continuity of elites in powerful positions [Sparks 2009]. Foreign governments remained involved in a billion-dollar 'democratization industry' [Ottaway 1997: 5; Cheeseman 2015: 115] to fund elections, assist with the building of civil society and also to promote independent media — more often than not following a Western model. Because of the hegemonic influence of Western economic institutions and agencies over economically weakened African states, the political reforms in African states coincided with the introduction of conservative socioeconomic policies [Joseph 1997: 374].

Although African societies were not as 'media-saturated' [Voltmer 2013: 51] as in other transitional countries of the 'third wave', the media increasingly formed an important part of the political communication landscape on the continent. The major developments in digital media, especially social and mobile media platforms, have particularly been prominent in analyses of recent democratisation processes (the co-called 'Arab Spring' has become iconic in this regard, despite often exaggerated claims about social media's impact). Despite the crucial role digital media can play to ensure transparency and accountability in the democratisation process and to foster citizen participation in political communication, these platforms have also been blamed for providing platforms for extreme speech that foment ethnic and racial conflicts while enabling new forms of surveillance by authoritarian governments.

An added complication when considering the media's role in democratisation processed in Africa is that an adversarial and hostile media could heighten the uncertainties and volatilities characterising the transitional space. The increasing centrality of mediated political communication on the continent can also enable the rise of populism and a 'delegative' rather than 'representative' democratic culture [Voltmer 2013: 98–99]. In many African countries, equating the popular will with presidential power is typical of the 'big man politics' that dates back to the colonial system of indirect rule through chiefs [Houeland & Jacobs 2016]. State control over the media in African countries can exacerbate a media-centred politics that provides support to such strongmen. African opposition parties and activists however also increasingly adopt spectacle, personalism and media logic to challenge political power, as has been the case in South Africa by the disruption of par-

liamentary proceedings by the opposition party the Economic Freedom Fighters [Chuma, Bosch, Wasserman 2017]. While investigative media in young African democracies like South Africa have fulfilled an important task of unearthing corruption and holding the new democratic government accountable, it stands to reason that the aggressive stance adopted by these media may also erode trust in newly established democratic institutions and create a climate of hostility and suspicion [Voltmer 2013: 103]. This type of watchdog role has often been modelled on the liberal-democratic normative frameworks characterising the media in more established democracies in the North, which introduces a tension when journalists in African countries see their primary role as serving their communities or promoting development [Voltmer 2013: 104]. These roles however do not necessarily have to be mutually exclusive [De Beer et al. 2016].

The reintroduction of multiparty-democracy in Africa however also suffered setbacks right from the start, with implications for political communication. The return of party politics in African democracies in the 1990s coincided with the resumption of the civil war in Angola (1993) and the genocide in Rwanda (1994), leading [Cheeseman 2015: 143,167] to question 'the wisdom of introducing elections in deeply divided African societies' as they may exacerbate pre-existing instabilities. [Voltmer 2013: 190] echoes this sentiment by pointing to the 'unsettling truth' that elections and uncensored media — both markers of liberal democracy — can 'frequently deepen antagonisms, even to the point of the recurrence of physical violence, because electoral competition inevitably increases the visibility of differences and divisions'. The prevalence of ethnic polarisation in post-authoritarian African countries, reflected in African media practices [Wasserman & Maweu 2014], prompt a reconsideration of the link between democratisation and the media. Some critics of Western media development attempts — which typically emphasise unfettered media in the context of democratisation — have therefore suggested a degree of censorship and control over the media in African contexts to prevent abuses of media freedom and hate speech that may derail fragile democratisation processes and transitions [Voltmer 2013: 192].

The backsliding of democracy in many parts of the continent also had a negative impact on the media, ranging from imprisonment and harassment of journalists to threats to freedom of expression and the erosion of media pluralism [Wasserman & Benequista 2017: 1]. However, even despite the often shrinking space for free and independent media in these countries, there are also many examples of journalists that continue to challenge political authoritarianism and corruption. Across the continent, alternative media platforms and channels have also arisen to provide information and commentary that serve as forms of political communication.

Political communication by other means in Africa

The moves towards greater democracy on the continent have, on the whole, rejuvenated the media. As democratisation brought the end of military regimes and dictatorships in post-colonial Africa, it also brought greater press freedom, citizen participation and media freedoms [Wasserman & Benequista 2017: 1]. Democratic reversals on the continent have however been widespread in recent years, with a corresponding decline in media freedom [Wasserman & Benequista 2017: 1]. Despite the ebb and flow of democratic culture in Africa, and the waxing and waning of media freedom, a variety of media practices and diverse types of political communication continue to burgeon on the con-

tinent. These include online and mobile media that have shown strong growth in recent years and continue to do so, while older forms of print and broadcast media remain relevant as trusted sources of information for the majority of Africans.

Alongside these media platforms, more informal, small scale forms of communication drawing from a wide symbolic repertoire. These platforms provide forms of political communication that are especially important within African contexts where democratic regressions have brought the media under stricter control by the state. In many African countries, the state owns major newspapers, exert control over state broadcasters (which are often 'public' in name only) and threaten, harass or even imprison critical journalists. In these contexts, other forms of political communication have not only provided vital sources of information, but also filled a vacuum of trust — when mainstream media are seen to be captured by political authorities, informal channels of communication (what [Ellis 1989] has called 'pavement radio') become the trusted purveyors of political information and commentary in everyday life. These forms of communication may include oral communication, popular theatre, dancing, communal singing, jokes, storytelling and gossip [Bosch, Wasserman & Chuma 2018; Berger 2002: 29]. These alternative forms of political communication can be seen to have sustained a participatory culture especially where more formal media platforms have been out of reach of rural Africans, or where these have come under political pressure. Political communication in African contexts therefore can be seen to take a variety of forms, perhaps even more so than in more established democracies in the North where the links between mediation and democratisation may have been more predictable and stable.

The adoption of alternative forms of political communication outside the mainstream media is not only due to political factors, but also social ones. In unequal and stratified societies such as may be found across Africa, the voices being amplified by the mainstream media may be of those actors who already have the most power to influence media and political agendas, rather than those on the fringes who need to be drawn into the political process [Voltmer 2006: 3]. When mainstream media conceives of its role primarily as providing a neutral space for stakeholders to compete politically, it could result in the further marginalisation of historically oppressed, weaker or vulnerable sections of society. Transitional democracies are "frequently faced with fragile identities, deep social divisions and unfinished nation-building" [Voltmer 2006: 5]. This is true of many African societies, where racial and ethnic identities have been key elements of political organisation and have shaped the way the media have conceived of and catered for its audience in relation to its broader definition of the public interest [Rodny-Gumede 2017: 3].

Given the above political and social limitations on the ability of the mainstream media to provide adequate channels for political communication in African democracies, it is not surprising that alternative channels have flourished. Let us look at two examples — firstly, the use of online satire to critique hegemonic political power, and secondly, the use of alternative platforms to critique the mainstream media itself.

Example one

While democratisation in Africa has led to a much wider recognition of media freedom than before, the onset of an authoritarian creep has meant that these rights often exist in theory rather than practice. During these democratic regressions, governments

often become increasingly intolerant of media criticism, leading to conflicts between the media and government and eventually limitation or suspension of media freedoms. In these contexts, political information and debate often find expression through channels that might not immediately be recognised as the kind of factual news and public-oriented information that has come to occupy the top rung of the liberal-democratic normative media hierarchy.

One such context is Zimbabwe, where democratic struggles and authoritarian repression of civil society and the media have led to long periods of conflict. The Zimbabwean crisis had a detrimental effect on the formal democratic culture, but also created opportunities for alternative forms of communication that illustrated how the media-democracy link may manifest itself in ways other than the dominant liberal-democratic normative model.

The crisis, which came to a head around 2000, was a long time in the making. After gaining its independence from Britain in 1980, Zimbabwe incurred vast expenses as a result of its roll-out of pro-poor, state welfarist policies which , coupled with the repayment of colonial-era debts, put the country in a precarious financial position [Mare 2016]. After running up budget deficits and debts, Zimbabwe was forced to adopt Structural Economic Adjustment Programmes in the 1990s, which led to massive unemployment, social unrest and de-industrialisation [Mare 2016]. Politically, authoritarian tendencies inherited from the colonial period and liberation struggle — an example of the 'elite continuity' marking transitions to democracy referred to earlier — amplified the tensions ensuing from the unstable economic conditions [Mare 2016]. This continuity extended to the retention of colonial-era laws intended on repressing political competition, which significantly narrowed the democratic space. The wave of democratic reforms sweeping across Africa in the 1990s did have some liberalising effect on the Zimbabwean public sphere in the sense that several civil society organisations sprung up during the period, but protests against deteriorating living conditions were met with repressive laws which again constrained the democratic space. When president Robert Mugabe used state resources to pay gratuities to revolting war veterans, the economy went into freefall, precipitating a political and economic crisis that was to last for a decade. Many instances of violent conflict and political clashes occurred during the ensuing crisis. The crisis was characterised by violent land invasions, politically motivated violence, food shortages, economic stagnation, the breakdown of law and order, the rejection of a new constitution by opposition groups and disputed presidential and parliamentary elections that were marred by violence, torture and displacements [Mare 2016:43; Ndlela 2005: 74]. These conflicts can be considered democratisation conflicts as they are linked to failed attempts at instituting constitutional reforms, and previously unsuccessful attempts at dealing with land reform after colonialism [Ndlela 2005: 74–5].

During this crisis, the state's control over the media grew while the space for free political discussion, debate and citizen participation shrunk. The state built up its monopoly over the media: its control over two major national daily newspapers and two major weeklies surpassed the circulation of the small, independent press, while the 'public' broadcaster remained so in name only, as the state exerted monopoly control over the airwaves [Moyo 2007: 82]. The state broadcaster was required to remove foreign news bulletins and prevented from playing protest songs [Mare 2016: 56]. Laws such as the Access to Information and Protection Privacy Act and Public Order and Security Act were passed,

giving the government and its security apparatus further tools to control the public sphere and suppress dissenting reporting, comment and analysis [Moyo 2007: 83]. At the same time, the state-owned media were forced to practise 'patriotic journalism' [Mare 2016: 55].

Within this restrictive environment, digital media, in particular blogs and social media platforms like Facebook, have provided an platform for political communication. When several newspapers were closed down and journalists arrested under this legislation, journalists left the country en masse and started to run online newspapers from the diaspora [Moyo 2007: 84]. These online news outlets served an important function to critique the regime from outside the country and provide Zimbabweans in the diaspora an opportunity to stay informed of events in their home country, using correspondents operating from within Zimbabwe [Moyo 2007: 100]. The crisis also attracted significant international media attention [Ndela 2005].

Some of the most interesting developments occurred within the country, where the space for journalism remained severely restricted. Within this pressurised environment, alternative platforms and genres started to play an important role. As [Willems 2010] has pointed out, mediated resistance in the Zimbabwe crisis often took the form of rumour, humour and gossip circulated orally and through mobile phone networks in the form of text messages and emails. Other forms of cultural expression such as popular music have also been noted to fulfil journalistic functions by communicating everyday life problems, circulate political messages — albeit often veiled — and address political, social and economic issues in the repressive Zimbabwean context [Mano 2007]. These popular media forms were especially constitutive of an emerging brand of Zimbabwean youth politics [Mare 2016: 53] and can be considered as articulations of everyday resistance against state power [Willems 2010: 6].

The appearance in 2013 of a satirical Facebook account called 'Baba Jukwa' is an example of such an alternative platform operating in the sphere of everyday life in Zimbabwe during the crisis. Using an anonymous cartoon character, Baba Jukwa ('father of Jukwa' in Shona), the page posted allegations of corruption and scandals involving politicians and state officials, and making often very accurate predictions of events about to unfold in Zimbabwean politics — leading to suspicions that the author is closely connected to the ruling Zanu-PF party [Tveit 2014]. While ostensibly more humorous gossip than serious whistleblowing [Harding 2013], the anonymous and highly popular Facebook page interpellated its readers in the language of politics, resistance and citizenship, addressing its readers at the start of each post as 'Great Zimbabweans' and ending with 'Asijiki' (no retreat) [Mutsvairo & Sirks 2015: 331]. Benefiting from the anonymity that the Internet provides, the page attacked Mugabe and his government, called for political change and warned users of alleged irregularities ahead of upcoming elections [Chibuwe & Ureke 2016: 1257]. The page was updated several times a day to publish leaks that could embarrass the government, e. g. alleged assassination plots by the government, corrupt dealings, violence, brutality and election-rigging [Mutsvairo & Sirks 2015: 33]. It cast leaders from the ruling party ZANU-PF in a comical and satirical light, and ran a naming and shaming campaign against corrupt officials [Mare 2016: 61]. Not only did Baba Jukwa's Facebook page poke fun at officials and unmask malfeasance, it also gave Zimbabwean citizens an opportunity to air their grievances directly with officials by providing their telephone numbers — which many Facebook users apparently availed themselves of the chance [Mutsvairo & Sirks 2015: 331]. As a dialogic space, Facebook users could also use

the digital platform to speak back to political power by leaving comments and voice their opinion on the site [Chibuwe & Ureke 2016: 1257]. In a repressive environment, such political frivolity can have serious consequences: the editor of the state-controlled newspaper *Sunday Mail* Edmund Kudzayi and his brother Phillip were thought to be behind the Facebook account and arrested in 2014 on charges of 'attempting to commit an act of insurgency, banditry, sabotage or terrorism, undermining the authority or insulting the President and publishing or communicating false statements prejudicial to the state' [Chibuwe & Ureke 2016: 1248]. The case was later dAropped after the state withdrew charges due to lack of evidence [Sibanda 2015]. This response is characteristic of how the Zimbabwean government responded harshly to political jokes made by citizens in public, or expressed concerns about rumours circulating [Willems 2010].

While observing the usual caveats about weak social ties on the Internet and the limits of online activism, [Mutsvairo & Sirks 2015] carefully concede that this Facebook account might have contributed to an increased level of political participation in Zimbabwe. This is not so much because of any demonstrable democratising effect it might have had on political processes, but the fact that the blog became a popular topic of political conversation in an otherwise highly restrictive environment. The digital space in Zimbabwe also became a place for political contestation, as a similar figure, Amai Jukwa appeared on Facebook, but supporting the governing party, ZANU-PF and seemed to serve as a counter for Baba Jukwa's allegations [Chibuwe & Ureke 2016: 1248]. While Baba Jukwa could be seen to provide a counter-hegemonic voice through alternative platforms and popular formats, Amai Jukwa illustrated the ways in which these new platforms could also be appropriated by the ruling class to perpetuate hegemonic narratives [Chibuwe & Ureke 2016: 1258]. These accounts also invigorated news reporting about Zimbabwean politics and upcoming elections. As an online phenomenon, they attracted local and international news reports, but also became trusted sources of political news themselves — even more so than mainstream media [Chibuwe & Ureke 2016: 1249]. Baba Jukwa's Facebook page as well as the various other forms of popular expression that articulated the everyday lived experience of Zimbabweans during the period of political and economic crisis can therefore be considered 'hidden transcripts' — secretive discourses created by subordinated groups that provide a critique of power [Mare 2016: 85]. During conditions where conflicts between an increasingly intolerant and authoritarian government and the mainstream media were growing in frequency and intensity, the social media platform provided an alternative space for the journalistic functions of monitoring and facilitation of debate could take place — even if the format in which this occurred was different from the 'objective' and factual reporting usually associated with the media's 'watchdog' function.

The Zimbabwean examples shows how political communication can take unexpected and creative ways in African contexts marked by conflict and authoritarianism, where the independence of the mainstream media is under threat and freedom of expression limited. Here the role of alternative forms of communication, not only online but also in everyday life, fulfill the function of a skeptical or critical laughter that serves as a tool for the oppressed to undermine the authority of official discourses in the course of their everyday life [Willems 2010: 11].

The Zimbabwean example illustrates the complexity of the media-democracy link in African contexts of conflict, democratisation and democratic regression. The dominant literature about media and democracy as it derives from a study of established democra-

cies in the Global North sees a free media environment as a prerequisite for democratic debate and civic participation. Repressive environments like the Zimbabwean during the periods of crisis posed severe threats and dangers to journalists and critical citizens and should therefore not be romanticized. However, the examples of alternative forms of expression and channels for the circulation of political communication referred to above, illustrate how critical media fulfilling a democratic function in the public interest can a) still take be produced under non-democratic circumstances and b) can take unexpected forms, be produced on non-mainstream platforms and in genres that are not usually associated with the 'serious' function of news production but rather reflect everyday lived experience. These examples confirm the point made by [Hanitzsch & Vos 2018: 157] in their study of comparative journalism models globally, namely that journalism outside the Global North manifests itself in a wider repertoire of functions than the narrow form of political reporting often privileged in Northern scholarship of the media-democracy link, and that 'everyday life is not devoid of political significance'.

Example two

The Zimbabwean example above showed how alternative media spaces can emerge under authoritarian conditions and facilitate democratic debate. That case illustrated how political communication is not reliant on a free and independent mainstream media alone to perform its democratic functions. While the Zimbabwean example foregrounded the political pressures on political communication in the mainstream, we can turn to the South African and context to examine how structural, political-economic factors can also have a strong influence on political communication in the mainstream and the need for alternatives to emerge. In this example, the focus will fall not so much on the provision of alternative channels for the dissemination of information or political criticism (as was the case with the Zimbabwean example), but to contest the mainstream media agenda, critique hegemonic political narratives and mobilize for resistance.

Such contestation of mainstream media agendas can be seen to have taken place in the response to the coverage of ongoing community protests in South Africa. that have been ongoing since the advent of democracy and has shown a steady increase. These protests have often resulted in violent clashes between protesters and police, and there have been many cases of injury and even death. While these protests are often labeled 'service delivery protests' in the media because protesters demand better provision of water, electricity and sanitation, protesters have also made it clear that they feel excluded from decision-making, not listened to by politicians, that do not feel that the arrival of democracy has improved their lives significantly and that they are fed-up with corrupt and nepotistic politicians that only serve their own self-interest. As such these protests can be seen as democratisation conflicts, and an investigation into them is also an investigation of the post-apartheid democratic sphere itself.

The end of apartheid in 1994 saw a demobilisation of activists movements that were active in the anti-apartheid struggle, but not long afterwards a new wave of social movements emerged that protested some of the policies implemented by the new democratic government [Pointer, Bosch, Chuma & Wasserman 2016]. These movements included ones that resisted the privatisation of public services (e.g. the Anti-Privatisation Forum) and demanded the provision of anti-retroviral medicines in the public health sector (the

Treatment Action Campaign). It has often been pointed out that the voices of these pro-testers are missing from the mainstream media, and that if they do appear in the media, it is in a highly circumscribed fashion that portrays them as violent or irrational. These portrayals are often linked to political-economic factors that determine the mainstream media's orientation towards affluent, elite audiences instead of the poor communities engaged in the protests. [Pithouse 2007] summarises the mainstream media's class orientation and their adoption of the perspective of the affluent as follows:

The organisers of these protests very rarely appear in the elite sphere as people with ideas. Thirteen years into our parliamentary democracy it remains unthinkable to actually have an organiser of a 'service delivery' protest on a television panel speculating about their origins. The assumption that the capacity for thought is a function of class is adhered to rigorously and so the elite discourse rolls on relentlessly and blindly as academic or NGO 'experts' are called upon to explain the 'mysterious' politics of the poor.

The South African mainstream media tend to report on protests from the perspective of a suburban elite, often focusing on the disruption caused by these protests to the daily activities of the employed and affluent. Radio reporting on protests are often limited to traffic updates, to warn listeners to take an alternative route to work when a road is blocked. Such reports therefore serve to keep disruption to the status quo to a minimum.

This orientation of the mainstream media has prompted activists resort to violent or destructive behaviour in order to provide a spectacle that would attract the attention of the mainstream media, or employ strategies of representation that would satisfy the conventional news values of such media. South African activists report that they are often called by journalists to ask whether "anything is burning" — if nothing is burning, they would not come out to report, as the protest does not satisfy their criteria for newsworthiness and spectacle [Wasserman, Bosch & Chuma 2016].

Apart from being able to 'play the game' in order to appeal to mainstream media's criteria for newsworthiness, activists also contest their omission, marginalization or mis-representation in those media by creating their own tools and channels for an alternative form of political communication. Often these tools may at first glance not seem like forms of mediation. A closer investigation within a theoretical paradigm intent on finding ways in which media representations are contested and challenged, will however recognize that political actors often avail themselves of unconventional methods in order to make themselves seen and heard, and to challenge dominant media frames. These methods may include what has been referred to as 'nanomedia' [Pajnick and Downing, 2008] — small-scale media, including community radio or video, as well as popular songs, dances, street theatre, graffiti and modes of dress. In South Africa, the use of *toyi-toying* (a militant march-dance), blockading of roads and sit-ins can also be seen as a way for social and political actors to contest the dominant mediatization of conflicts that they are involved [Chiumbu 2005]. This can be done either by using these channels to distribute alternative representations or counternarratives, or to mobilise for direct activism, e.g. protest marches. In African contexts especially, these digital technologies are often combined with other forms of political communication such as door-to-door campaigning, distribution of pamphlets or items of clothing, in order to amplify messages and give activists a broader communication repertoire [Chiumbu 2015].

Conclusion

In both the above conflict case studies, it appeared that the link between media and democracy in Africa is not always as self-evident as liberal-democratic orthodoxy may suggest. The example of 'hidden transcripts' in social media from Zimbabwe illustrated that journalism can flourish despite an absence of ideal democratic conditions. In that context, journalism may not always take the typical form of rational, fact-based, dispassionate reporting, but satire, gossip, jokes and other forms of cultural expression could also serve to reinvigorate the public sphere and sustain a democratic culture in the face of authoritarian creep or democratic regression.

In turn, the South African example of alternative forms of political communication used to contest mainstream media respresentations of protest, indicate how the choice of platform or channel for political communication is closely linked to the socio-economic location of communicator and intended audience.

Studying forms of political communication, and the link between media and democracy in regions outside the media-saturated, stable democracies of the Global North, therefore require attention to the detailed, contextual differences across geographic contexts globally. The multiple and creative ways in which African users appropriate and adopt media for democratic life are a useful example to illustrate how political communication differs beyond such boundaries.

References

Cheeseman, N. (2015). *Democracy in Africa: Successes, Failures, and the Struggle for Political Reform.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chibuwe, A., Ureke, O. (2016). 'Political gladiators' on Facebook in Zimbabwe: a discursive analysis of intra-Zimbabwe African National Union-PF cyber wars; Baba Jukwa versus Amai Jukwa. *Media, Culture & Society, 38* (8), 1247–1260.

Chiumbu, S. (2015). Social Movements, Media Practices and Radical Democracy in South Africa. *French Journal for Media Research,* 4, 1–20.

Christians, C. G., Glasser, T. L., Mcquail, D., Nordenstreng, K., White, R. A. (2009). *Normative Theories of the Media: Journalism in Democratic Societies.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Chuma, W., Wasserman, H., Bosch, T., Pointer, R. (2017). Questioning the media — democracy link: South African journalists' views. *African Journalism Studies, 38* (10), 104–128.

Chuma, W., Bosch, T., Wasserman, H. (2017). The media, civil society and democracy in South Africa: The case of the State of the Nation Address 2015. *Communicatio, 43* (2), 93–108.

De Beer, A. S., Malila, V., Beckett, S., Wasserman, H. (2016). Binary opposites — can South African journalists be both watchdogs and developmental journalists? *Journal of African Media Studies, 8* (1), 35–53.

George, C. (2013). Diversity around a Democratic Core: The Universal and the Particular in Journalism. *Journalism, 14* (4), 490–503.

Hanitzsch, T., Vos, T. (2016). Journalism beyond democracy: A new look into journalistic roles in political and everyday life. *Journalism, 19* (2), 146–164.

Houeland, C. & Jacobs, S. (2016). The 'Big Man' Syndrome in Africa. *Africa is a Country.* Retrieved from https://africasacountry.com/2016/03/the-big-man-syndrome-in-africa.

Huntington, S. (1991). *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Joseph, R. (1997). Democratization in Africa after 1989: Comparative and Theoretical Perspectives. *Comparative Politics, 29* (3), 363–382.

Josephi, B. (2013). How Much Democracy Does Journalism Need? *Journalism, 14* (4), 474–489.

Mare, A. (2016). Facebook, Youth and Political Action: A Comparative Study of Zimbabwe and South Africa. PhD thesis. Rhodes University.

Moyo, D. (2007). Alternative media, diasporas and the mediation of the Zimbabwe crisis. *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies, 28* (1&2), 81–105.

Mutsvairo, B., Sirks, L. (2015). Examining the contribution of social media in reinforcing political participation in Zimbabwe. *Journal of African Media Studies, 7* (3), 329–344.

Ndlela, N. (2005). The African Paradigm: The Coverage of the Zimbabwean Crisis in the Norwegian Media. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture,* November, 71–90.

Ottaway, M. (1997). African Democratization and the Leninist Option. *The Journal of Modern African Studies, 35* (1), 1–15.

Pajnick, M. & Downing, J. (2008). Introduction: The challenges of nano-media. In M. Pajnik, J. Downing (Eds), *Alternative media and the politics of resistance: Perspectives and Challenges* (pp. 7–16). Slovenia: Peace Institute.

Pithouse, R. (2007). The University of Abahlali base Mjondolo. Voices of Resistance from Occupied London. Retrieved from http://abahlali.org/node/2814.

Pointer, R., Bosch, T., Chuma, W., Wasserman, H. (2016). Civil society, political activism and communications in democratisation conflicts. Mecodem Working Paper. Retrieved from http://www.mecodem.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Pointer-et-al–2016_Civil-society-political-activism-and-communications-in-democratisation-conflicts.pdf.

Rodny-Gumede, Y. (2017). Questioning the Media and Democracy Relationship: The Case of South Africa. *Communicatio, 43* (2), 10–22.

Sibanda, T. (2015). Baba Jukwa Case Collapses. *NewsDay.* May 30. Retrieved from https://www.newsday.co.zw/2015/05/baba-jukwa-case-collapses.

Sparks, C. (2009). South African Media in Transition. *Journal of African Media Studies, 1* (2), 195–220.

Stremlau, N., Iazzolino, G. (2017). Communications, power and governance in democratisation conflicts. *Mecodem Working Paper*. Retrieved from http://www.mecodem.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Stremlau-Iazzolino–2017_Communications-power-and-governance-in-democratisation-conflicts.pdf.

Tveit, M. (2014). Facebook and Politics in Zimbabwe: Who is Baba Jukwa? *Africa is a Country.* 19 July. Retrieved from https://africasacountry.com/2014/07/facebook-politics-in-zimbabwe-who-is-baba-jukwa.

Vladisavljević, N. (2015). Media framing of political conflict: A review of the literature. *Mecodem working paper*. Retrieved from http://www.mecodem.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Vladisavljevi%C4%87–2015_Media-framing-of-political-conflict_-a-review-of-the-literature.pdf.

Voltmer, K. (2013). *The Media in Transitional Democracies*. Cambridge: Polity.

Wasserman, H., Benequista, N. (2017). *Pathways to Media Reform in Sub-Saharan Africa: Reflections from a Regional Consultation*. Washington: Center for International Media Assistance. Retrieved from https://www.cima.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/CIMA-Media-Reform-in-SSA_web_150ppi.pdf.

Wasserman, H., Bosch, T., Chuma, W. (2016). Voices of the Poor are Missing from South Africa's Media. *The Conversation.* 22 January. Retrieved from https://theconversation.com/voices-of-the-poor-are-missing-from-south-africas-media–53068.

Wasserman, H., Maweu, J. (2014). The tension between ethics and ethnicity: examining journalists' ethical decision-making at the Nation Media Group in Kenya. *Journal of African Media Studies, 6* (2), 165–179.

Willems, W. (2010). Beyond dramatic revolutions and grand rebellions: everyday forms of resistance during 'the Zimbabwe crisis'. *Communicare, 29* (1), 1–7.

Author's information:

Herman Wasserman — Professor of Media Studies; herman.wasserman@uct.ac.za