



ONLINE MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE
PLAYED BY ZIMBABWE'S ONLINE ENGLISH NEWSPAPERS IN THE RUN-UP
TO 2008 ELECTIONS.

BY

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Dr Nicola Jones (Supervisor)

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ABSTRACT

This study discusses the potential for promoting cyber democracy through interactivity, on the Internet. Both interactivity and cyber democracy will lead to a broadening of the Zimbabwean public sphere by including online newspapers in the media circle. It views interactivity, cyber democracy and the public sphere as central to free expression. Zimbabwean online newspapers are not fully exploiting the Internet's potentials to promote the threefold ideal for public deliberations identified in this study. The content analysis of 22 Zimbabwean online newspapers revealed that many newspapers are providing interactive tools that are of limited relevance to interactive communication. The different models for assessing interactivity, cyber democracy and the public sphere in the online newspapers that were employed in this study point to very low levels of interactivity, hence the rest of the components were affected. The three aspects of public deliberation identified in this study were found to be interdependent on each other. The qualitative research procedure confirms and provided reasons for low interactivity on Zimbabwe's online newspapers from the editors' perspectives. The online editors are cautious in their approach to a free-form type of public deliberations. Interactivity, potentials for cyber democracy and possibilities of a broadened public sphere were found to be very low on Zimbabwe's online newspapers. However, the Internet itself is endowed with great possibilities for political deliberations that remain untapped. The onus is upon the newspapers to accord citizens opportunities for participation by making available tools for higher levels of interactive communication.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background: Zimbabwean Online News

Civic groups need freedom of expression and access to information in order to structure and act on political choices. Sustainable, institutionalized democracy requires social networks and political filtering organisations. Without functioning networks to process political communication, legitimate, representative democratic political institutions and processes are hard to nurture. (Zaffiro in Tomaselli and Dunn (Eds), 2001: 99)

This study aims at identifying and assessing the role of Zimbabwe's online English newspapers in the run-up to the March 2008 elections, in the face of a monopolised media system that was used to legitimize the ruling party's hegemony. It is clear that there are specific linkages between media control, politics and the election in Zimbabwe and it has been argued that undermining the media weakens democratic practices (Mazango, 2005). This study is premised on an understanding of the interrelated nature between politics, democracy and the media.

The Zimbabwean media, dating back from colonial times, has been part of the civil service. Central to this civil service is the controlling arm of the government. The current government, more harsh than its predecessor (the colonial government), exercises autonomous control over both broadcast and print media. It prescribes what the media disseminate and uses the media as propaganda tools. It has been extremely difficult to practice independent journalism within the borders of the country due to draconian media laws enforced by the ruling party, especially in the past two decades (Chuma, 2004).

Tough media laws in Zimbabwe forced the closure of independent media and exiled most seasoned journalists to other African countries and abroad. These frustrated, exiled journalists established websites that focus on Zimbabwean news and issues: websites such as changezimbabwe.com, zwnews.com, and newzimbabwe.com to, name but a few. Today there are at least 34 Zimbabwe-focused Internet news websites established.

Zimbabweans, both at home and around the world, visit these websites for news, and are given a chance to participate in debates and online polls on issues concerning their nationhood. Seasoned Zimbabwean journalists, academics, professionals and even ex-Rhodesians contribute to these websites by submitting articles for circulation (Chuma, 2004). Some of these websites carry original materials, whilst others repackage news about and from Zimbabwe that has already featured in other publications around the world. Well-established publications such as *Zimbabwe Independent*, *Guardian* (London) and the South African *Mail & Guardian* are the major hosts for repackaged news. Some of these online newspapers, just like their print versions, are government controlled, such as www.herald.co.zw and www.chronicle.co.zw. These are mere online versions of their print publications.

Online journalism is becoming increasingly important with repressive media laws that are strangling independent journalism within Zimbabwe. The online arena provides an alternative source of information for many Zimbabweans who can access it. In the light of the Zimbabwean media scenario, the provision of user-friendly interactive tools on these websites becomes of paramount importance because the traditional media has failed to tolerate the views of independent writers. There is such a distinct gap in news reportages between independent media and government controlled ones, that readers do not know

what to believe. Interactive tools empower readers to engage fully with texts and arrive at meaning on their own. This study explores the availability of interactive options on Zimbabwean newspaper websites aiming to discover the extent to which these news agencies utilise the two way-way communication and interactive features of the Internet.

Chapter 1 will introduce the subject of the study, by defining the parameters of the research and defining the key terms of the study. This chapter will also state the research questions, objectives and hypothesis surrounding the provision of interactive options on Zimbabwean web newspapers.

Chapter 2 will outline the theoretical context of the study and provide the relevant models of Internet communication. It will discuss the concept of interactivity in relation to computer mediated and/or Internet communication. It will then relate the study to cyberdemocracy theories through a review of related literature.

Chapter 3 will outline the research methodology, starting with the sampling method used to select the newspaper websites visited. This chapter will also explain the data collection method used. It will also provide an outline and motivation for the research design, as well give a description of the methods of data analysis used.

Chapter 4 will compile and provide a description of the research results. It will also establish patterns in the results and hopes to present a linkage between the results and the theoretical frameworks on which the study is grounded.

Chapter 5 will present the data analysis. This chapter will discuss the findings by linking

them to existing research and the theoretical contexts as outlined in Chapter 2. It will also give an interpretation of the findings within the contexts of interactive communication theories. The chapter will link the findings of the study with the online communication process.

Chapter 6 will provide conclusions of the entire research project, based on its findings. It will also discuss the conclusions of each of the research objectives and highlight the limitations of the study, providing recommendations for future research.

1.2 Context and Motivation

The researcher was motivated by many factors to undertake a study in this area. Some of the factors are specific to the chosen social context (the Zimbabwean social context), and others are general to the entire mass communication environment. In order to define a parameter for the study, the Zimbabwean web newspaper cyberspace was chosen as the area of investigation.

Starting with the general motivational factor, there has been common dissatisfaction regarding the limited one-way communication of mass media (Schultz, 1999). The media has a long-standing tradition of being regarded as the only source of information, and the audience are seen as passive receivers today, as passive consumers of mass media's manipulated or at least commercialised content (Schiller, 1984). Habermas (1989: 261) also argues that the hierarchical structure of modern mass communication imposes a "don't talk back format" on audiences. Lack of interactivity in mass mediated communication was of great concern for media critics long before the term "interactive" became a buzzword in

the age of the Internet (Rosenberry, 2005).

Lush and Kupe (2005) draw attention to the denigration of interactive online journalism as “unprofessional” because the Zimbabwean government believes that the only people to practice free expression through mass media are those whom it accredits with certain journalistic qualifications. The less influential people in Zimbabwe are denied the right to free expression. The government of Zimbabwe uses its political and military power to allow those who are sympathetic and supportive of its policies the right to free expression (Lush and Kupe, 2005). However, the online arena defies this state of affairs with its emphasis on citizenry journalism. The Zimbabwean government underplays the role of the media in the democratisation process; yet a successful transition to and the consolidation of a democratic government depends on the institutionalisation of two intermediary organisations, political parties and the independent and critical organs of mass media (Mazango, 2005). The media is central to the formation of a democracy that leads to the credibility and legitimacy of those in power. Therefore, there needs to be more in-depth engagement with the media as an asset to the democratisation process.

Similarly, Rosenberry (2005) criticises the traditional media for their dysfunctional roles in issues of governance and civic engagement. In other words, the media have ceased to be the major agents of political communication which enlighten people on good governance. The media is drifting away from its central role as advocated by Ngugi (1995: 51), who says, “at its best, media can facilitate and connect, empower and clarify, offer a forum for proposals and serve as a reality check for governing elites. To nurture democracy and analyse, not only actions of politicians but policies and their implications.” In light of this view, the media is entrusted with the core role of scrutinizing public policy issues,

ideologies and social systems, and put them into meaningful discourses for the benefit of their audiences and readers.

The Zimbabwean media scenario is far from the ideal situation as postulated by Ngugi (1998). The politicisation of the media in Zimbabwe makes interactivity a dream on the horizon. Today civic groups are fighting for free expression, an aspect which can logically be viewed as a stepping stone to interactivity, and therefore the media in Zimbabwe has a long way to go to reach a level of interactive communication. Schultz (1999) advocates for public journalism, a type of journalistic practise where journalists solicit feedback from the audience to initiate free expression and ultimately interactive communications. What is clear with this approach is that interactivity precedes free expression. “ZBC (Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation) has failed miserably to live up to the post-independent promise of helping to make politics transparent by creating a public sphere in which everyone could participate” (Tomaselli and Dunn, 2001: 115). The media in Zimbabwe, both print and electronic, has become polarised and been rendered totally dysfunctional. The current government inherited a tradition of intolerance to diverse expressions from its colonial predecessors. Media houses are under such enormous pressure to retain licences to practice in the country, that they end up publishing articles that mirror the visions of the ruling party, and thus furthering the dominance of the regime.

A proposed solution to this dysfunction is one offered by theories of “cyber-democracy,” (Dick, 1999), which suggest that the Internet’s ability to close the gaps of time and distance with electronic interactivity has the power to provide a public sphere for citizens and journalists outside of political control. This promises to be a powerful and feasible solution to the crippled Zimbabwean media. However, the Internet, with all its promising

possibilities of bringing democracy to audiences' doorsteps, has been criticised by Rosenberry (2005) for presenting models that seem more cyber-utopian than realistic. There are a number of challenges that set back cyber-democratic efforts and these prevent the cyber world from being a near perfect world as suggested by the models. One of the challenges that prevent the Internet from being a threat to traditional media lies in its presentation of information to a fragmented audience. Improved online communication can be achieved when interaction is fostered by facilitation. Rosenberry (2005: 62) argues that the solutions proposed by cyber-democracy such as "the electronic town meeting" or the public sphere "cyber-salon" have not developed sufficiently as feasible alternatives to the current liberal-democracy model of political communication facilitated by traditional and mass media. The feasibility of cyber-democratic models of political communication is also affected by the limited accessibility of the Internet to ordinary Zimbabwean citizens. Despite this limitation, the online arena is the only available forum in which the Zimbabwean citizenry are able to practice their freedom of expression.

In spite of the arguments against it, the Internet still plays a significant role in disseminating unfettered messages. Dahlberg (2001) proposes that improved political action in the online arena has its greatest potential not when interaction is entirely free-form as cyber-utopians propose, but when it is fostered by facilitation. He advocates the emergence of a new function of journalism, which utilizes the interactive power of online journalism that by-passes the authority and organisational characteristic of mass media. These journalists can therefore draw a lot from the interactivity proposed in theories of cyber-democracy to define how online newspapers can be used as venues and avenues for greater citizen engagement. Online sites associated with newspapers are a perfect source for such a role because newspapers are the traditional source for the most in-depth

information regarding political communication, (Rosenberry, 2005). News websites are also the focal point for online news consumption. In the context of Zimbabwean online news dissemination, it has even come to the attention of the current regime that the Internet is becoming a powerful tool of political communication and criticism, hence, the anxiety and animosity has prompted Mugabe to pass a “spy law” to monitor Internet communication.

There have been a number of studies done on computer-mediated communication and on interactivity in particular. However, this research is lacking in the Zimbabwean online media. Drawing from the preceding discussion, the online arena proves to be the only alternative to evade the repressive media laws in Zimbabwe. More importantly, providing interactive options is one way of ensuring that readers gain their role as producers rather than mere passive recipients of media messages.

1.3 Key Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the different types of interactive options online, which Zimbabwean newspapers offer?
2. Do online newspaper sites offer discussion forums for citizen participation in public debates?
3. What types of topics were used for discussion forums and Internet polls?
4. Do newspapers offer a list of personalised e-mail addresses to contact individual editors and writers?
5. Do online newspapers carry out polls and surveys to investigate reader satisfaction?

6. How well are online newspapers putting institutional authority behind citizen voices?
7. Are websites providing space for citizen interaction on public issues?
8. Are the websites providing space for citizen interaction with officials?
9. How do the newspaper sites combine institutional and citizen voices?
10. How do the websites use interactive devices to present public affairs information serving the surveillance function of the people?

1.4 Statement of the Problem

The crisis that emanates from the lack of freedom of expression and access to information in the Zimbabwean context is a crisis intertwined within other complex crises. One problem directly linked to freedom of expression is the current Zimbabwean constitution. The constitution was deliberately re-drafted to suppress free expression. The 2002 Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) and the 2002 Public Order and Security Act (POSA), are repressive legislations inherited by the ZANU-PF government from its colonial predecessors after independence, and the Official Secrets Act, Parliamentary Privileges and Immunities Act, amongst others, are all used to criminalise free expression in Zimbabwe (Lush and Kupe, 2005). Therefore, in such a situation, it has been difficult to defend and uphold free expression, especially of less powerful citizens.

The passing of repressive media laws in Zimbabwe forced seasoned and principled journalists out of the country. These journalists have set up media outlets in the form of online newspapers, outside Zimbabwe. This study sets out to investigate how these online newspapers are utilizing the Internet's interactive potential to provide an accessible public

sphere for political communication and more importantly, in this context, to empower citizens with a voice.

The Zimbabwean media are quite contentious political battlefields. Media “games” or strategies of communication control to limit free expression have been played to manage political space. The first strategy is the centralisation of an Information Ministry in the President’s office to lead a new project of media control, while at the same time articulating a coherent defence of state policy (Mazango, 2005). Such strategies have worked very well in the past to prop up Mugabe’s regime. In the 2000 and 2005 elections and 2008 election run up, the opposition parties suffered defeats which could be attributed to deliberate and authorised local media blackouts. During the election run-ups, the state-controlled media either report information that is pro ZANU (PF) or is completely silent about the activities of the opposition parties, citizens; therefore, having to make voting decisions based on unbalanced information.

One can learn from Berger’s assertion in Tomaselli and Dunn (2001: 151) that the “media’s place in democratisation therefore encompasses their contribution to the development of a common public sphere, an informed and active citizenry and civil society, an accountable government and an appropriate legal regime”. It is therefore clear that the centrality of a free media is vital for the attainment of democracy. There appears to be little hope in reviving the state-controlled media in Zimbabwe to live up to this role under the current regime. The only hope there is, is in the new media, the Internet. Hence, the focus of this study is on interactivity, the one major distinguishing quality of the Internet.

The study itself is a content analysis of interactive options in Zimbabwean English language web newspapers. Most of these websites were designed in pursuit of (cyber) democracy. A content analysis will give the study a specific analytical approach to this unique feature of new media. Berelson (1952) cited in Deacon *et al*, (1999: 115) describes content analysis as a “research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication.” According to this definition, a content analysis is hailed for its “objectivity” because a researcher has to count clearly observable phenomena. It incorporates scientific methods of enquiry into researching communication where neutrality is guaranteed.

1.5 Principal Theoretical Terms

1.5.1 Public Sphere

The concept of the public sphere was first introduced by Jürgen Habermas, a student of the Frankfurt School of Social Research (Wayne, 2003: 78). Habermas (1996) gives a historical and sociological account of the rise and decay of the so-called public sphere. His work distinguishes between the public spheres of medieval times and those of contemporary corporate media structures. In both periods, the public sphere was “tied to the narrow interests of private and powerful persons” (Wayne, 2003: 78). In medieval times, the powerful and private persons were the aristocracy and in contemporary media structures, it is the capitalists. Nonetheless, Habermas (1991) defines the public sphere as a virtual or imaginary community which does not necessarily exist in any identifiable space. In its ideal form, the public sphere is “made up of people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state” (Habermas, 1991: 176). The term public sphere as in this definition is an explanation of the broad concepts of the physical social

sites or arenas where meanings are articulated, distributed, and negotiated or the medium through which ideas are contested. All the same, another comprehensive definition of the term public sphere is the one given by Rutherford (2000: 274-5), who says:

The [public] sphere remains a site for the production of public opinion that is given concrete form by surveys and polls which, to a degree, actually fashion the opinion through the process of asking certain questions (and not asking others). Because of an excess of goods and risks competing for attention, the sphere continues to be a contested arena; however, much of the excess is manufactured by people and institutions with money, moral clout, or other forms of power. The mass media play out a double role here, both as the vehicle for competitive spectacles and as the source of news, a different kind of discourse, though again a monologue and now contaminated by the ubiquity of publicity.

The Habermasian notion of a public sphere entails what Poster in Trend, (2001: 26) reviews as “a homogeneous space of embodied subjects in asymmetrical relations, pursuing consensus through the critique of arguments and the presentation of validity claims.” Habermas’ perspective thus is purely for a public meeting place where people deliberate and debate on topical issues as the only route to agreement. Habermas’ notion also points to an ideal public sphere that exists to provide both an arena for citizen engagement with public issues and a source of information about the activities of those in power. Rutherford’s (2000) definition, reflecting on Habermas’ perspective, explicitly points to the manipulation of the public sphere by elites, individuals and those with power, be it political, financial, military, or any other form of power. Thus the public sphere is

continuously a site of power struggle, with the most powerful dominating over the weak. It is therefore difficult, if not impossible, to retain the traditional public sphere of town hall, the village church, the coffee house, the tavern, the public square, a convenient barn, a union hall, a park, a factory lunchroom, and even a street corner (Poster, 1995). The web therefore comes in to revive and even further the idea of the Habermasian public sphere.

The contentious issue in applying the term public sphere to contemporary works stems from the definition of the term public sphere as opposed to private sphere. Various disciplines have deliberated on the term, from liberal to political economy theorist; however, consistency across these theories is their reference to the Greek definition of both the public sphere and the private sphere (Poster, 1995). From this perspective, the term private sphere is restricted to households and family structures, while the public sphere denotes what Frazer (in Poster, 1995) describes as, “the opposite of the "private" sphere in the sense that it is a locus of "talk,"...a space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs and which is essential to democracy”. In a public sphere, broader issues that affect a greater number of people are discussed.

Following arguments on the transformation of the public sphere from the traditional Habermasian notion, Poster (1995) brings the discussion within the context of electronically mediated communications, in particular the Internet. He questions the role of "talk," of meeting face-to-face and of "public" discourse in relation to the electronic form of exchange of symbols. He emphasises that, “the age of the public sphere as face-to-face talk is clearly over: the question of democracy must henceforth take into account new forms of electronically mediated discourse” (Poster, 1995). He advocates the abandonment of Habermas' concept of the public sphere in assessing the Internet as a political domain.

Reading from this argument, or even taking clues from Habermas' (1962) own sense of the collapse of the public sphere and his rectifying of this by publishing *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, the fluidity of the concept, however, must also be emphasised. It then follows that the term public sphere should be constantly reviewed in relation to changes in the modes of political communication. The notion of the public sphere is an ever changing one. The term thus metamorphoses in response to changes in the underlying methods of communication that informed its inception. Similarly, Boeder (2005) remarks that the public sphere is still alive, though not in the same form as Habermas' coffee house discourse; it has evolved to be aptly applicable in the environments of communication within electronic networks. The future of the public sphere is with the digital media, which offers exciting possibilities as digital networks enhance and change social structures. In a sense, the public sphere has always been virtual: its meaning lies in its abstraction. Even in Habermas' classical argument, the public sphere has always been in abstract terms (Boeder, 2005).

In relation to this research, the concept of public sphere will be evaluated in terms of how it emerges within online newspaper websites. This study adopts the presentation of space for public deliberation on newspaper websites as a working definition for public sphere. The research will explore the kind of public sphere Zimbabwean newspaper websites present. Zimbabweans are yearning for a medium through which they can voice their concerns freely. Such a medium would ensure a public sphere free from the snares of the repressive laws to which the traditional media have fallen victim. The availability of interactive options on the online newspaper sites will give rise to a specific public sphere which will be distinguished from that presented in the traditional media.

Arguments about the viability of the Internet to revive the public sphere in the Zimbabwean online arena are often centred on accessibility of the Internet to those in the country. However, recent statistics show that Zimbabwe is among the top ten Internet countries in Africa with about 1.4 million people currently accessing the Internet (www.internetworldstats.com 2008). Considering the failure by the Zimbabwean traditional media to present a public sphere for the people, the Internet's role as an emerging public domain becomes critically important.

1.5.2 Virtual Communication

Virtual communication is one of the added advantages of computer mediated communication. The online arena enables virtual communication to take place by creating virtual environments. Online communication is 'virtual' because it takes place in cyberspace, or virtual space as opposed to physical space, or geographical space (Tavani, 2004: 294). "Virtuality" or "the virtual" is thus a space in which online communicators feel themselves situated. It is a space somewhere in between two online communicators where they share experiences and bring about understanding regardless of physical distance. A virtual space can also be the place where communicators are when they are talking on the phone. Online virtual communication is packaged with features of interactivity to empower users.

Brey (1999) quoted in Tavani (2004: 294) defines virtual reality as "a three dimensional interactive computer-generated environment that incorporates a first person perspective." The excitement surrounding this computer generated environment lies in the technology's capability to simulate reality and create a fantasy world in which an individual can be absorbed. This kind of environment offers individuals an opportunity to adopt markers of

identity which could be completely different from their own in their physical social worlds, and provides users with the possibility of forming associations with others beyond geographical, social and political boundaries. Such an environment is suitable for real and truthful political debates, a location where opinions are formed, discussions held, and information filtered, far from the reach and control of politicians. In Zimbabwean political communication, the social space is subject to intimidation. Citizens are scared of speaking their minds because this is risky due to repressive political climates. Recent reports have shown citizens victimised, maimed or even killed for exercising their constitutional rights of free expression. Virtual communication therefore, offers a platform for honest and truthful political opinions.

1.5.3 Interactivity

The concept of interactivity in public communication has been a matter of interest for many scholars. Jensen (1998b: 201) defines interactivity as “a measure of a media’s potential ability to let the user exert an influence on the content and/or form of the mediated communication”. This definition emphasises user control in which the audience or reader is given power over the generation of information to be circulated by the medium. A study by Choi (2004: 12-25) published in the *Newspaper Research Journal* compares the interactivity practised in public print editions to that of online editions. Choi (2004) defines interactivity as “the possibility of connecting readers to editors and readers to other readers.” Interactivity in this context simply means enabling readers to communicate with each other, as well as with reporters and editors in relation to the media content. The concept of interactivity in public communication enforces the existence of a tripartite relationship among the editor/reporter, the reader and other readers. This relationship is then strengthened by the sharing of ideas and information in virtual public

spheres. To measure interactivity in communication, Choi's (2004) study developed three categories of communication with specific interactive tools to each: one-way communication, two-way communication and reactive/interactive communication.

Following Choi's (2004) three categories, interactive communication requires a chain of interrelated messages; hence the interactive tools associated with it have to facilitate the exchange of information and follow-up on the developments in the conversation. In one-way communication, one source sets the agenda and the other only receives feedback, while in two-way communication, both sides send messages. Two-way communication is present as long as the information flow is bilateral. Finally, reactive or interactive communication implies that roles are interchangeable, and all sides have equal control over the message flow (Rogers, 1995). This interchange ability of roles in the communication process will make it possible readers to become 'prosumers' in that it enables consumers (audiences) to become producers (Rennie, 2007). This study will ascertain the availability of interactive devices to readers for the existence of the three levels of interactive communication in Zimbabwean web newspapers.

The notion of interactivity is further expounded on by Tucher (1997), who notes that interactive devices are used to stimulate public discussions and draw thousands of people together in a virtual community. Interactive technology such as the Internet ensures the existence of virtual communities, as well as empowering citizens with the capacity to participate meaningfully in public discussions and in the production of media content. The concept of building virtual communities is not new in the media industry. Newspapers, magazines, television and radio have been involved in this business well before the emergence of Internet technology. However, the possibilities of interactivity are limited in

traditional media, thus the emergence of Internet technology is hailed for bringing to the media industry such an improvement. The concept of interactivity in public communication is so important that Hall (2001) proposes it should be added to the list of journalistic core values such as impartiality, objectivity and truth. Interactivity is the most distinctive contribution that online newspapers make to readers and to the newspaper industry (Choi 2004).

There are numerous definitions of the term “interactivity” that have emerged from various academic fields. For instance, Deuze (2001) identifies three forms of interactivity: “navigational interactivity” (through ‘Next Page’ and ‘Back to Top’ buttons and scrolling menu bars), “functional interactivity” (through direct links, Bulletin Board Systems and moderated discussion lists), and finally “adaptive interactivity” (offering chat rooms and personal e-mails). These three levels of interactivity are hierarchical; the first level (navigational interactivity) allows the Internet user to browse through the web pages easily. The functional level gives the surfer an opportunity to send feedback directly to the web master. The final level (adaptive interactivity) offers unrestricted forms of interaction among Internet users. A similar definition of interactivity given by Choi (2004) identifies three categories: interacting with people, interacting with technology and one that combines the two.

However, this study will adopt a definition by Coyle and Thorson (2001: 67): “A web site that is described as interactive should have good mapping, quick transitions between a user's input and resulting actions, and a range of ways to manipulate the content”. This definition lends itself suitably to this study because of its emphasis on mapping, speed, and user control. These are, indeed, the main features that the provisions of interactive tools on

a website seek to attain. This study focuses on establishing the availability of interactive options on news websites; this definition is undeniably appropriate and commensurate with the stated aims and objectives. Interactivity is in itself what the websites offer. Thus, the initiation of interactive communication is dependent on interactive options available.

Interactive communication is characterised by equality among participants. It entails a relationship such as the aforementioned one-way and two-way communication. In this study, interactive public communication is an indicator of democracy. This is because the achievement of a democratic consensus is indeed related to opinions that are not merely announced but discussed openly, free from distortions (Schultz, 1999). The more democratic a system is, the more it will accommodate interactivity over mere connectivity (Hacker, 1996). In relation to this study, interactive options offered by online newspaper sites will be identified and evaluated as a means to ensuring the dispensation of political communication and subsequently democracy.

1.6 Study Hypotheses

This study hypothesises that Zimbabwe's online newspapers are not offering enough interactive options for readers to ponder on political issues. Interactive options do not only facilitate information flow between politicians and readers, but also help readers engage in discussions, debates and informal chats, helping them gain insight into political issues (Rosenberry, 2005). Information gained by users as they interact on the online sites will be invaluable for their political decisions. Therefore, there is every need to provide a wide range of interactive options for readers to choose from.

This study also hypothesises that newspaper sites offer mere illusions of interactive options

to users. Since online newspapers are under so much pressure to offer benefits that their print counterparts are not able to provide, there is a greater need for a shift towards interactivity which might not necessarily be exploited in real practical terms. An interview schedule with online editors will ascertain or invalidate this hypothesis.

This study also assumes that Zimbabwean online newspapers are not providing space for citizens to interact with officials. Issues of the public sphere and the public space are highly contentious in the Zimbabwean context. It therefore became imperative for new media to address these issues, if they were to be relevant in the run up to the 2008 elections. In electronic democracy, it is vital that citizens interact with officials and authorities who are responsible for their political welfare. It is not enough for citizens merely to post their views on electronic media without a response from the public figures to whom their complaints or comments were directed.

1.7 Significance of Study

By elevating the communication capabilities of individuals, the Internet promotes heterogeneity and a new kind of pure democracy where we can be equal players in the information game. (Albarran and Goff, 2000: 25).

There has never been any other time in Zimbabwean media history when equal access to information was needed as much as now, because of the prevailing political climate. The 2008 elections in Zimbabwe will be deemed undemocratic if the controversial issues of access to information are not well addressed. There is a need for functional journalism specifically meant to empower ordinary citizens with information necessary for decision making. The Internet, with all its promises of interactivity lends itself squarely to this function for those who can access it. Accessibility of the Internet within Zimbabwe maybe

questionable, but with media repression, there was no other way of getting information to the people. Barring digital divide, Internet news was quite relevant to a balanced analysis of the political and economic situation. In support of this view, Jensen (1998a) alludes to the Internet's possibilities of ushering in democracy, political independence and individual freedom of choice. The excitement and expectation around the Internet lies in its potential for boundless possibilities of interactivity.

The importance of the Internet cannot be overemphasised in a country where the mainstream media "has always been chiefly state-controlled, heavily government-subsidised, and urban-based" (Bourgault, 1995: 42). In situations such as these, the Internet assumes a new role, of being both a source of information about the government, as well as a site where citizens can express themselves freely without any fear of victimisation. One may question the limited accessibility of the Internet for ordinary Zimbabweans; however, the argument still remains, that the weaker cannot be empowered by weakening the strong. It is logical that those who are dissatisfied with information circulated in the mainstream media will look for alternatives; hence, the Internet will fill in the gap. While acknowledging consumption from those without alternatives, traditional media will remain in operation to serve the regime people and those who are yearning for change will turn to independent media to follow political events. In terms of empowerment, the Internet has indeed offered a solution to the dysfunctional mainstream media, and with regard to information dissemination, the hope is, those with access will subsequently share amongst those without.

The emergence of independent Zimbabwean newspapers in the online arena ushered in a new dispensation of news circulation. Information that was once concealed from the

general populace has now been brought to light. For instance, information about atrocities and crimes against humanity committed by the Zimbabwean government in the Matabeleland region of the country soon after independence, is being revisited by these independent online papers, much to the benefit of many Zimbabweans with access to the Internet. Such information was a taboo subject in Zimbabwe, or was dealt with as propaganda, or misrepresented to ensure that the current regime stayed in power. This is one of the reasons why independent Zimbabwean newspapers defiantly published online, to make the public aware of what those in power had done.

The excitement surrounding the Internet does not only lie in its potential to transcend geographical and political boundaries, but in the fact that it's a new medium that could extend interactive options in journalism (Schultz, 1999). Taking into consideration this view, this study seeks to identify tools that the Zimbabwean online media can use to encourage interactive communication. As rightly noted, the Internet is not a megaphone but a conversation (Lasica, 1996). This assertion describes the potential of the Internet to facilitate conversational and interactive communication; however, the study significantly seeks to establish in empirical terms the realities of these potentialities on Zimbabwean newspaper websites.

In response to the failure of mainstream media to provide readers a voice, pressure is mounting on newspaper websites to stimulate an electronically backed-up democracy. Unless these Websites integrate special tools, such as e-mail links and discussion areas (bulletin boards) which enable readers to make their own statements, they will not be different from the traditional sender-receiver model (Schultz, 1999). Thus this study seeks to ascertain the availability of such interactive options to Internet news consumers on

Zimbabwean online newspapers.

Following the disillusionment with mainstream media in Zimbabwe, the study also seeks to evaluate how Zimbabwean online newspaper sites use the Internet's interactive options to involve citizen participation in public debates. Online journalism can exploit e-mail, chat rooms, online polls, and bulletin boards to elicit reactive and subsequently interactive communication (Schultz, 1999). It is particularly important for Zimbabwean online newspapers to exploit these interactive options, given the country's record of a fragile democracy and lack of tolerance to free expression.

Online newspapers have the potential to provide for interactive communication and to equip readers with the necessary tools to master their own destinies in the business of news dissemination. This would also foster a new kind of democracy, relevant to a country experiencing high levels of intolerance and suppression of free expression. Therefore, this study is quite significant and relevant to the current media situation and state of democracy in Zimbabwe.

1.8 Research Methods and Data Analysis

A research methodology similar to the ones used by Schultz (1999) and Rosenberry (2005) was developed for this project. 22 of the 34 online Zimbabwean newspapers were purposively selected for a content analysis. A list of Zimbabwean newspapers provided on the web site of Africa South of the Sahara (<http://www-sul.stanford.edu/africa/zimbambwe/zimnews.html>) was used as a sampling frame. It was one of the most reliable and up-to-date lists of Southern African online newspapers. The sampling frame was composed of both weekly and daily newspapers. The researcher

purposely selected daily web publications for the sake of uniformity.

A review of Zimbabwean online newspapers was conducted to ascertain the presence of interactive devices available to readers. The sample size was drawn broadly to present a fair representation of Zimbabwean news websites. The study examined the daily online newspapers. The absence of circulation figures of Zimbabwean newspapers was not seen as a threat to validity, since the study was designed merely to catalogue the presence or absence of interactive tools.

Interactive tools were coded. It was not required to read through the entire editorial text. The study focused on the availability of feedback tools such as e-mail links and directories, chat rooms, blogs, online polls, and discussion forums. Due to the fluidity of online journalism, the coding scheme was left open for unexpected interactive options. Coding did not only include quantitative categories but qualitative notes, as well. This way it was possible to obtain more specific information on encountered interactive options, especially on the topics and structures of chats, polls, and forums.

It was clear that the features to be examined in this study were fairly constant elements that did not change on a daily basis, unless a newspaper had launched a complete overhaul of its site. While topics of discussion forums or polls, for example, did change frequently, the availability of such tools did not.

Coding was performed by the researcher. The researcher acknowledged that recognizing the mere availability of interactive options was not enough to describe the concept of interactivity. However, linking interactive options to characteristics drawn from cyber-

democratic theory was used to provide the necessary descriptive tools for a qualitative analysis.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction

The exponential development of the World Wide Web (WWW) has created clusters of online communities, enabling interactivity among cohorts to satisfy communication, information and entertainment needs (Wu and Chang, 2005). These online communities also share critical information such as news and current events. Given the novelty of the Internet as a medium of news dissemination, empirical research into the practicalities of the promises of this technology is still in its infancy.

The features that distinguish Web sites from other media are: multimedia, speed of updating information, horizontal distribution, decentralization, accessibility, no hierarchy, no censorship and interactivity (Lasica, 1996). Many scholars agree that interactivity is the primary characteristic of new technologies, hence the need for its re-evaluation in communication research (Heeter, 1989; Rafeli and Sudweeks, 1997; Ha and James, 1998; Rosenberry, 2005).

In public journalism as in online journalism, what users do with content is more important than how content may affect users. Users are actively chasing discovery, rather than passively being informed. (Pearce, 1997: 486). This is like a wake up call for designers of interactive media, that they must offer choices that have meaning and consequence for their users. This chapter discusses some of the theories inspired by the rapid development of interactive media. The chapter will also provide the principal theories this research is premised on. Relevant studies of the concept of interactivity will also be examined with a

view to finding literature that will help provide answers to the research questions set earlier in this study.

2.2 The Internet and Public Discourse: The Emerging Public Sphere

The Internet is a medium that has the ability to provide space and equal opportunity for all participants to present their views (Witschge, 2008). The Internet is defined using various terms by different scholars, a worldwide system of computer networks, a network of networks, a global network connecting millions of computers, a communicative medium for the multitudes, a public, cooperative and self-sustaining facility accessible to hundreds of millions of people worldwide (Witschge, 2008; Bruns, 2008; Bohman, 2004). It is also important to understand that the Internet is not synonymous with the World Wide Web. The web is one of the services the Internet offers and it is the most widely used. Using Internet facilities such as the web and instant messaging, both journalists and readers are able publish their work with minimum effort. There is a need, therefore, to get an “understanding of how the Internet and other forms of electronic communication might contribute to a new kind of public sphere and thus a new form of democracy” (Bohman, 2004).

The Internet, because of its characteristic features of anonymity, is considered ideal for the type of communication that should take place in the public sphere (Witschge, 2008). Anonymity is essential if individuals are to air their views freely and truthfully. The Internet offers a space where users can deliberate on public issues, at the same time giving them the privilege of revealing their identity or withholding it if they so wish. Individuals do not have to pay with their identity to access the public sphere. There is indeed a link between the bourgeois public sphere that Habermas explores, and the emerging public

sphere that the Internet presents. The Habermasian bourgeois public sphere is defined as “the public of private individuals who join in the debate of issues bearing on state authority” (Calhoun, 1997: 7). The Internet, then, fits into this form of a public sphere as users maintain their privacy when they engage in discursive practices of political bearing on this medium. Anonymity ensures that they remain private individuals; what becomes public then can simply be the discussed political issues. Contrary to television and other forms of mainstream media that expose the identities of participants to the audience, the Internet offers an ideal public sphere that encourages relatively honest democratic discussions.

Individual participation and easy accessibility of the public sphere are some of the distinguishing characteristics of a Habermasian public sphere. Limited accessibility of the Internet to all is seen by many scholars as a major setback to the democratic deliberations of public issues. According to Habermas (1989: 1), “events and occasions (are) ‘public’ when they are open to all”. Ideally, participation and accessibility should not be privileged to certain individuals. There should be no discrimination of any form. However, Habermas’ ideal public sphere was not realized as he had postulated. Habermas’ bourgeois public sphere excluded women of all classes and ethnicities, men were discriminated on the basis of property ownership and some races and ethnicities were completely barred from political participation (Fraser in Calhoun, 1997: 118). This can be equated to the selective accessibility of the Internet to those with the economic means. Therefore, the public sphere in its ideal form has never been realized. The question of accessibility thus is not a measure of a medium’s qualification as a public sphere. The Internet’s qualification as an emerging public sphere is based on the fact that it goes beyond the conventional spaces of the mass media stage, to accord discussions and deliberations that are no longer

staged by expert communicators that act in front of a relatively passive audience, but now directly involve citizens as active participants (Bruns, 2008). The Internet offers citizens a stage to become actors themselves rather than merely watching the political struggle among the political elite.

The Internet's potential to revive the Habermasian notion of a town meeting, coffee shop and/or salon public sphere is then set back by its lack of 'dialogue and conversation' in the type of communication it accords its users. According to Bohman in Crossley and Roberts (2004: 133), dialogue is critical in a public sphere in that "it not only proceeds as a communicative exchange, in the form of turn-taking, but also that it is guided by the mutual expectation of uptake; that is, speakers offer reasons to each other and expect that others will consider their reasons at least to the extent that their speech acts contribute to the ongoing course of interaction, without anyone exerting control over it or having special status." Although that dialogue exhibits a complete and ideal communicative environment where interlocutors enjoy the benefits of asking for clarification, reading from paralinguistic and non-verbal speech acts to enhance understanding, the same can be achieved in Internet mediated communication. Internet users can re-read a text, use hyperlinks, and make inferences to ensure a better understanding. Sometimes, in face-to-face conversations, speakers are embarrassed to express their opinions which they will readily air via an Internet facility. Therefore, the Internet is not a prejudiced public sphere in this regard; in any case, it can be hailed for promoting truthful deliberations on public issues (Bohman in Crossley and Roberts, 2004).

Expounding further on participation, the public sphere is described as a space in "which the public is to set in motion a critical process of public communication through the very

organizations that mediatize it” (Habermas, 1989: 232). The emphasis here is on democratization that is linked to active political participation, as opposed to privatized forms of spectator politics in a bureaucratic capitalist society in which the media and elites control the public sphere (Kellner, n.d.). The latter is what characterizes the traditional media today. The Internet with its facilities is the only medium with the potential to give rise to a public sphere where user participation is prioritized. Whether that potential is realized in real practical terms or not is not a question at the moment; the issue is on the type of public sphere the Internet presents. The Internet is indeed a public sphere where participants can discuss issues at different geographical and socio-political levels ranging from organizational to global. As Bohman in Crossley and Roberts (2004: 152) concludes, “the Internet preserves and extends the dialogical character of the public sphere in a potentially cosmopolitan form”. The Internet therefore widens the scope of the Habermasian public sphere.

According to Bohman in Crossley and Roberts (2004: 137), there is a widely accepted view that “the Internet ‘decentres’ the public sphere: it is a public of the publics”. In other words, the Internet provides spaces for a wide range of cultural, racial or ethnic groups of different sizes. The variations in group size are infinite; there will be different public spheres leading to numerous and disjointed public spheres. This is not uncommon as society is not homogenous, hence the creation of sub-cultures of people with common interests. From these sub-cultures then, forums and spaces are created where members come together to discuss their own matters of interest. The fact the Internet presents an ideal public sphere promotes the idea of a decentralised public domain where censorship is difficult. Except in a few websites, for example on *The Mail and Guardian (M&G online)*, if people on chats/blogs./discussion forums release offensive information, the website

deletes it.

What has been discussed is the role that the Internet plays to create a public sphere that has ideal conditions for free speech. A lot of questions have been raised about how people are using that space to deliberate on matters of public concern. The issue is to find out whether the Internet provides the basis for free speech. A public sphere may exist; the issue of whether people use it or not cannot be used to question this existence. This discussion has established that the Internet provides space for decentralized public spheres with guaranteed anonymity, and assured equal participation. These characteristics bring the Internet closer to Habermas' notion of an ideal public sphere.

2.3 Interactive Online Journalism

The concept of interactivity in public journalism dates back to traditional methods of soliciting feedback, for instance in print media, such as the use of 'Letters to the Editor', where readers offer their response to media messages. However, this method is criticised by media scholars, who see it as merely reactive communication (Schultz, 1999). A number of media scholars have advocated a move from reactive to interactive communication (Rosenberry, 2005; Choi, 2004; Deuze, 2001). This, they suggested, would not only revitalize public communication, but also help newspapers defend their markets. An increase of feedback and reader participation would build trust and product loyalty (Lasica, 1998). Therefore, a site with more interactive options would attract and retain readers. In contemporary journalism, reader participation is easily facilitated by the presence of newspapers online.

The Internet is a new medium that could extend interactive options in journalism. As noted

by Schultz (1999), the hype of the Net lies in its unifying principle, its potential to facilitate interaction and interconnectivity. The possibilities of interactivity in contemporary journalism are all packaged in the Internet as a medium. The Internet has the potential to bring about interactivity, but that does not necessarily mean it is the reality in the practice of online journalism. Not every communication mediated by the Internet is interactive. Interactive options may be available, but readers may not be adequately accustomed to their new roles of being producers of information, continuing to operate as mere receivers.

Based on findings by some media scholars (Lasica, 1996; Choi, 2004), critics insist that traditional media organisations offer only illusions of interactivity on the Net. Previously, Kartz (1994) had argued that most online papers did not even provide the e-mail addresses of their reporters and editors. One study (by Newhagen, Cordes and Levy, 1995) has revealed that editors of a newscast did not even read the e-mails from the audience, although they had encouraged people to send in their comments. This shows that mere availability of interactive tools on the medium is not in itself an indicator of their use by readers and journalists.

The challenge of new media today is not only a shift towards online journalism and interactivity in particular, but also a mindset shift towards regarding readers as associates in the production of media messages. As Marshall (2004: 1) points out, "with every change in the way we communicate in our culture, there is a new struggle over meaning, significance, knowledge and power." Doubtlessly, the advent of Internet technology as a medium of communication has brought with it threats to the existing forms of power in journalism. Old rules no longer apply as journalists quickly have to adapt to sharing the platform with readers in the design and delivery of news. This leads to the decentralisation

of power and hence the struggle over meaning, significance, knowledge and power takes on a new twist altogether.

Interactive online journalism is premised on the participation of the reader in a process that already provides a certain structure and common knowledge based on surveillance of the environment through exposure to news sites (Rosenberry, 2005). Readers then come into the process as active participants rather than passive recipients of messages, while journalists assume roles of facilitation. In political communication, therefore, journalistic roles should include the role of “democratic midwife” (Gurevitch and Blummler, 1990). This is a mammoth task for journalists as they have to fill roles regarding surveillance, roles of gatekeeper, to nurture democracy and to facilitate the smooth flow of information in a bilateral manner, using new interactive tools. Journalists are entrusted with the grand role regarding the birth of a new kind of democracy (cyber democracy) facilitated by the Internet’s interactive potential.

One way of ensuring that online papers are playing their part meaningfully is by providing arenas for citizens to interact with officials in politics and government (Rosenberry, 2005). As Cohen (1997) proposes, the key purpose of democratic institutions is to provide “arenas in which citizens can propose issues for the political agenda and participate in debate about those issues.” In the Zimbabwean online arena, this purpose is difficult to accomplish because politicians are selective of the type of media they use. Citizens may be eager to interact with politicians, but the prevailing political climate coupled with repressive media laws hampers the process. However, despite all these factors working against efforts to provide meaningful online arenas, interactivity remains the only way available to Zimbabwean citizens to participate in debates on political issues.

2.4 Interactive Tools: The Promises of Online Journalism

A better understanding of interactivity is very crucial to the identification of interactive options. There are indeed so many definitions of interactivity and these can be categorized based on the primary focus of authors on process, features, perception, or combined approaches (McMillan and Hwang, 2002). From the process perspective, scholars focus on activities such as interchange and responsiveness that are key elements of interactivity, thus defining interactivity as “the extent to which the communicator and the audience respond to, or are willing to facilitate, each other’s communication needs” (Ha and James, 1998: 461). Scholars who focus on features seek to identify either general characteristics (such as user control and two-way communication) or specific characteristics of Web sites (such as search engines and chat rooms), that define interactivity (McMillan and Hwang, 2002). Adopted in this study is a turn towards features combined with process as an indicator of a website’s interactive potential. Online journalism being so young in the Zimbabwean context, research in this area is not yet established, and study seeks to bridge that gap. Most importantly, features in the form of interactive options form the basis of interactive communication. The focus on features is consistent with media studies and online journalism in particular.

Based on findings by McMillan and Hwang (2002), three elements appear frequently in the interactivity literature: direction of communication, user control, and time. Most relevant to this study are direction of communication and user control. Researchers who focus on how computers facilitate human interaction often focus on enabling two way communications (Darlberg 2001; Lasica, 1996; Jensen, 1998a). Other scholars focus on the capability of providing feedback (Heeter, 1989; Rafaeli and Sudweeks, 1997). User control as an element of interactivity is characterised by the fact that the Web often provides users

with more content and more navigational tools than traditional media. Much of the literature, according to McMillan and Hwang (2002), which focuses on human-to-computer interaction (HCI), examines the ways that humans control computers. The time element is also important to interactivity because it includes the ability of users quickly to navigate through a wealth of information and easily find what they are seeking (McMillan and Hwang, 2002). Similarly, Latchem and Lexie (1993: 23) also noted that the benefit of interactive systems is that users “can work in their own time and at their own pace, choose their preferred navigational pathways and delivery systems and develop their own mental models and schemata.”

The unifying principle in the three interactivity elements is that they are all anchored in the availability of interactive options. Earlier on McMillan (2000) had identified thirteen features that, based on literature about interactivity, might suggest that a Web site is interactive. These included: E-mail links, registration forms, survey/comment forms, chat rooms, search engines, and games. Web site features that facilitate two-way communication and user control are synonymous with interactivity.

Similarly, a study by Choi (2004) identified and classified interactive features as follows:

One-way communication

- E-mail to reporter/editor
- Telephone to reporter/editor

Two-way communication

- Internet poll
- Question and answer section

Reactive/Interactive and communication

- Online discussion boards
- Chat room
- E-mail to friends initiated by forums
- Blogs

(Choi, 2004:19)

In Choi's (2004) study, connectivity precedes interactivity. Mere connectivity does not necessarily lead to interactivity. Readers and editors will then have to use interactive tools to pass messages for interactive communication to take place. The study also distinguishes between interactive communication and two way communication. Two way communication is present as soon as messages flow bilaterally, whereas interactive communication requires that later messages refer to earlier ones (Rafaeli and Sudweeks, 1997). Interactive communication, therefore, requires references (facilitated and enabled by interactive tools) to a chain of interrelated messages. In relation to this study, the use of interactive tools in the Zimbabwean public sphere will be evaluated in terms of how editors and journalists aim to use interactivity on their websites to create political awareness.

2.5 The Concept of Cyber Democracy and its Implications

"The media in Black Africa are unique. In no other regions of the world have the media been forced to endure change so rapidly" (Bourgault, 1995: 2). Zimbabwe, like any other black African nation, has its people quickly shifting from face to face communication to electronic communication. The media, too, are rapidly changing from traditional forms, for instance printed forms like letters, books, newspapers and magazines are transforming and

embracing new media forms such as the Internet, the World Wide Web, email, mobile phones, digital television and graphics (Marshall, 2004). This is all happening in a context in which both the people and the media have to recover from a system of patronage inherited from colonialism. This system made it difficult, if not impossible, to separate politics from the media and economics. Basically everything revolved around politics.

Tsagaraousianou *et al* (1998) coined the term “electronic democracy” to describe the enabling power of new technologies to increase citizen participation in the political landscape. Electronic democracy, according to Tsagaraousianou *et al* (1998), dates back to the 1960s in the Western world as evidenced by radical endeavours such as pirate radio stations, and now it is the turn of information and communication technologies (ICT). This phenomenon also applies to Black Africa, as pirate radio stations were used during liberation struggles to reach out to the oppressed masses in the same way as the new Internet technologies today are being used to evade repressive government laws. Electronic democracy, though not supported *per se* by empirical research as in the West, is indeed practiced in Black African communities.

Following arguments by Tsagaraousianou *et al* (1998), one of the most significant contributions of electronic democracy to influence the decision making process is the interaction of the user/citizen and the local authorities in electronic voting. Electronic democracy, however, is a term which can be used interchangeably with cyber-democracy, the only difference being that cyber-democracy is more specific to computer mediated communication. As established by Tsagaraousianou *et al* (1998), both electronic democracy and cyber democracy with their trifling differences, have added to an expanded and accessible public sphere in the Western world. There is a correlation between the state

of democracy and the public sphere. According to Habermas (1989), democracy has very often been associated with the development of public spaces where citizens can formulate their political identities and express their political will.

The key feature of cyber democracy as propounded by Tsagaraousianou *et al* (1998) is the provision of civic networks which support bottom-up “grassroots projects”, aiming to empower citizens as well as those characterised by top-down approaches, aiming to provide public information. The technological developments in the media industry which make these possible are considered in the context of their influence on the political landscape. To be relevant to the political landscape, therefore, technological developments in the media should aim at creating public spheres which are:

not colonised by the state and political parties and not subjected to the logics of commercialisation and commodification (of) public spheres in which citizens could freely engage in deliberations of public debate. (Tsagaraousianou *et al*, 1998: 4)

In explaining the political role of cyber democracy Tsagaraousianou *et al* (1998: 55) emphasise that politics depends on the existence of public spaces and forums to which everyone has access. In such public spaces, people encounter other people, meanings, expressions and opinions with which they do not necessarily identify. Therefore, cyberspace becomes a place for human interaction more like physical meeting places such as shopping malls, only which in cyberspace people do not meet face to face. However, the most important thing is that political debates and discussions are held, which help to shape political decisions by the interlocutors.

Theories of cyber democracy are not without flaws. Schmidtke in Tsagaraousianou *et al* (1998) in his study of Berlin's civic network, points out that ICTs do not automatically lead to democracy; neither do they present a universally acknowledged public sphere. "Cyber democracy does not resemble the ideal, it is more appropriate to speak about a highly diversified field of coexisting, but not universally intertwined discourses and interactions." (Schmidtke in Tsagaraousianou *et al*, 1998: 61). He highlights commentaries regarding ICTs which suggest that their interactive and decentralised characteristics will revive Habermas' notion of the universal communicative community. However, the dominant structure of cyber democracy, Schmidtke suggests, does not reflect the idea of communication and exchange of views under conditions of equal access. Schmidtke suggests that civic networks which promote cyber democracy are not directed at a homogenous collection of computer literate citizens, but at people with differing agendas, aims, levels of computer literacy and political ideals. Thus the public sphere which might be imagined is one of diversity and co-existing communicative arenas, rather than one that is homogenous.

The other weakness of cyber democracy, Schmidtke notes, is that debates are characterised rather by a range of often speculative political projections than by an appropriate reflection of the actual tendencies and projects found in current social life. From this it can be deduced that there is a tendency for a shift towards the academic and witty, rather than simple political communication. This results in the alienation of cyber democracy from reality on the ground. Indeed, media technologies allow for more horizontal communication, but this does not necessarily translate into a democratisation of public life.

Even though communication in cyberspace is hailed for its “decentralisation and deterritorialisation” tendency (Schmidtke in Tsagaraousianou *et al*, 1998), this comes in with a lot of other factors which mitigate the success of cyber democracy. For instance, because of the aforementioned tendencies, the public sphere can no longer claim to be the space of interaction occupied exclusively by the engagements and the resources of its citizens.

2.6 Interactivity Models: A Theoretical Basis for Studying Cyber Democracy

2.6.1 Heeter’s New Media Communication Theory

The Internet as a news medium is distinguished from other media by features such as multimedia, speed for updating information, horizontal distribution, decentralization, accessibility, no hierarchy, no censorship and interactivity (Lasica, 1996). These distinguishing features have turned around the whole mass communication theories upon which traditional newspapers were originally modelled. Mass communication theories which were originally modelled around the one-way transmission of messages from a source to a receiver, such as Shannon and Weaver's model of communication, the "magic bullet" theory, the "two-step flow" model of media effects, the principal of selective attention and perception, and the Westley and MacLean model, with its concepts of gatekeepers and feedback, and all are no longer applicable in the Internet era (Kenny *et al*, 2000). Against this backdrop, Heeter offers an alternative perspective to understanding mass communication.

According to Kenny *et al* (2000), Heeter’s theory acknowledges the empowering aspect of the interactive features of new media, so much so that the receiver is no longer a passive

recipient in a one way communication set up but an active participant. Enabled by interactive features, people seek information or select information more than they "receive" information sent by journalists. Heeter cited in Kenny *et al* (2000) identifies six dimensions of interactivity: complexity of choice available, effort users must exert, responsiveness to the user, monitoring information use, ease of adding information and facilitation of interpersonal communication. These dimensions are specific and measurable and can be used in communication research as analytical tools.

Heeter's (1989) Dimensions of Interactivity in Kenny *et al* (2000):

i. Complexity of Choice Available

This can be measured by the number of hyperlinks, texts or graphic browsers and search engines online newspapers give to users to enable them to navigate through the newspaper site, and by how important these choices are to interactivity. Under this dimension, users can also be empowered to choose a language they prefer to receive the information in.

ii. Effort Users Must Exert

This is explained as the amount of time and effort it takes for a user to access the information on a newspaper website. This dimension works in two ways. On the one hand, if readers take more time fiddling with the technology to get what they want, it results in satisfaction if the effort yields the desired outcome. Users can also feel empowered and that they are in control. On the other end, when users take less time and effort to access a text they can also be attracted to the newspaper site because of the easy accessibility of information.

iii. Responsiveness to the User

This dimension focuses on the efficiency of an online newspaper to respond to queries that users might have. Online newspapers can have editors and/or reporters on duty to respond to queries from users. Responses to users can also be done by the technology itself depending on how advanced that technology is.

iv. Facilitation of Interpersonal Communication

The fourth dimension examines how interactive features enable communication between users and users, users and online newspapers' staff and users and politicians or those in authority. Interactive devices like e-mail links, discussion forums and live chats can be assessed on their role in facilitating interpersonal and synchronous communication.

v. Ease of Adding Information

This dimension provides an assessment of the role reversals between editor/reporter and the reader. It looks at how the reader is empowered to add information on an already circulating article or add completely new information and pass it on to other readers. However, this does not mean giving the readers autonomous control of the website. Readers can be allowed to add information on certain sections of the website, while news stories might remain the editors/reporters' job for the purposes of maintaining credibility. The dimension is a valuable tool to measure the potential of news websites to empower readers, especially by realising the fact that by merely identifying available features the empowering potential can also be inferred.

vi. Monitoring System Use

This dimension is specifically discussed in line with online newspapers. It suggests the use

of monitoring devices to track the number of visits to the website. The monitoring device will then give web designers and editors an idea of the level of interest the website is able to generate among readers. A high number of visits indicate that a website is meeting the needs of the readers.

Kenny *et al* (2000) used Heeter's dimensions of interactivity to test the hypotheses that profit-driven, purely web-based newspapers and US-based online newspapers had more interactivity potential. None of their hypotheses was supported. They found that there was no relationship between profit making, being purely web-based nor being US-based and the level of interactivity a newspaper site accords. Interactivity levels were generally low.

2.6.2 The Measures of Perceived Interactivity (MPI) Model

Interactivity is an enabling factor of cyber democracy. There is strong dependence in cyber democracy on interactivity and interactive features, hence interactivity models provide a theoretical basis for understanding cyber democracy. Increased interactivity broadens the spectrum of cyber democracy. Therefore a better understanding of interactivity is of critical importance to the study of cyber democracy. Cyber democracy is a relatively new concept compared to interactivity which has already been the subject of discussion for quite a number of scholars from a wide range of fields (Heeter, 1989; Rafeli and Sudweeks, 1997; Ha and James, 1998; Choi 2004; McMillan and Hwang, 2002).

One of the relevant theories of interactivity that would help unpack cyber democracy is the Measures of Perceived Interactivity (MPI) (McMillan and Hwang, 2002). The approach focuses on the consumer's perceptions of a website's potential for interactivity. Apart from focusing on user perceptions or experiences of users, this approach interestingly combines

the three basic elements of interactivity, which are, direction of communication, user control and time, to come up with a holistic view. These elements, having appeared consistently in most of the interactivity literature, are central to the study of interactivity and consequently cyber democracy. The MPI approach acknowledges the multidimensionality and complexity of the concept of interactivity making it inadequate for it to be explained by any monolithic model.

2.7 Key Dimensions of Interactivity

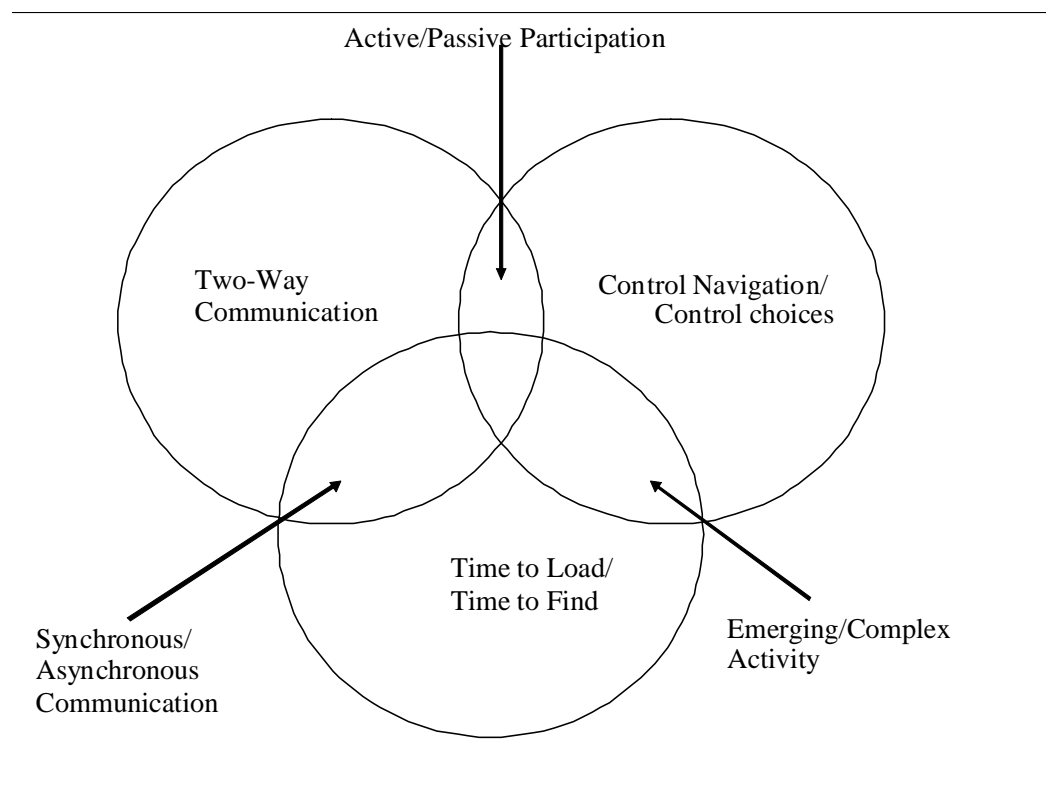


Figure 2.1: McMillan and Hwang's (2002) illustration of the three dimensions of interactivity.

While some scholars might view the dimensions of interactivity in Figure 2.1 separately, there is indeed a lot of overlap on the basis of the findings of McMillan and Hwang's (2002) study. Naimark (1990) argues that real interactivity takes place at the intersections

of these dimensions. The overlap of two way communication and control navigation/control choices produces either active or passive participation as shown in Figure 2.1. When a consumer of an Internet message chooses to respond by replying to that particular message, that results in active participation. This is only possible when the user combines the benefits of both control navigation and two way communications. In the same way, the intersection of time to find/time to load and control navigation will elevate users to operate at a higher level of engaging in complex activities. None of these dimensions will ensure interactivity on their own. There has to be an overlap with another dimension for interactivity to take place. A user has to be proficient in the three dimensions in order to have a positive perception of the interactivity of a Web site.

According to McMillan and Hwang's (2002) study, three MPI scales were proposed:

- i. The real time conversation scale which reviews factors that focus on communication and the overlap of time and communication.
- ii. The no delay scale which can be used to determine the time taken to download and load information as the user interactively engages with a Web site.
- iii. The engaging scale which focuses on control or technological and mechanical tools that facilitate interactive involvement. It is also used to measure time related concepts such as time to find such tools. The engaging scale can also be interpreted to be a measure of how the user absorbs, reflects and processes the information on the Web site.

The scales of measuring interactivity show a strong overlap among the key dimensions as suggested in Section 2.6.2. The MPI model provides items to determine the appropriateness of interactivity levels to different situations. User perceptions give

advertisers, Web designers, politicians and all who are involved in the business of persuasive communication what they need to re-examine the successes or failures of interactivity on their site.

The MPI model, though designed specifically to explicate interactivity in relation to advertising, can be used as a basis for understanding cyber democracy. Though cyber democracy and advertising might appear to be parallel entities, there is a lot of co-relation between the two terms. The overlap between the two lies in the idea that researchers on both cyber democracy and advertising often aim to “get inside the head” of consumers (voters) and understand how and why they respond to messages (McMillan and Hwang, 2002). In cyber democracy, perceived interactivity is most likely to influence citizenry perception and behaviour as summarised Figure 2.2:

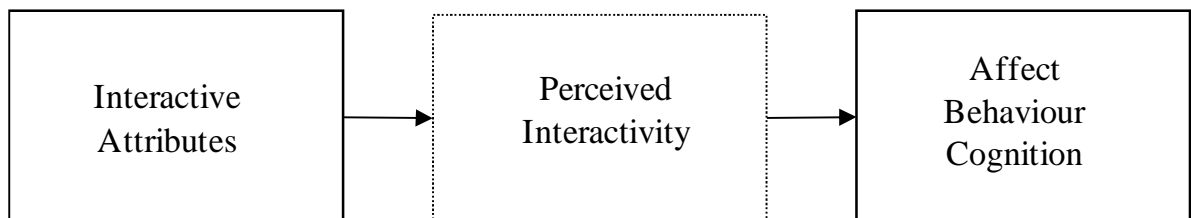


Figure 2.2: Bucy and Tao’s (2007) illustration of perceived interactivity

However, perceptual approaches, though gaining of a lot of attention from scholars, are criticised heavily for placing too much emphasis on the users’ subjective experience of interactivity. Perceptual approaches elevate perceived interactivity at the expense of structural characteristics of information technology that are required to evoke a sense perceived interactivity in the first place (Bucy and Tao, 2007). The relationship between perceived interactivity and technological attributes are too glaring to be ignored. For a comprehensive approach to address issues around interactivity, these two aspects have to

be considered.

2.7.1 The Mediated Moderation Model

The mediated moderation model of interactivity as explicated by Bucy and Tao (2007) focuses on piecing together ideas from different approaches to locate commonality among them. The model approaches interactivity as technological attributes of mediated environments that enable reciprocal communication or information exchange. According to this model, interaction can then be located between communication technology and users, and between users through technology, (Bucy and Tao, 2007). Most notably, the model combines ideas from message-centred, structural and perceptual approaches. In order to get a full understanding of the mediated moderation model, a brief explication of the three common approaches is offered and thereafter reconciled.

The message-centred approaches are premised on Rafaeli's semantic view point of interactivity as "an expression of the extent that in a given series of communication exchanges, any third (or later) transmission (or message) is related to the degree to which previous exchanges referred to even earlier transmissions" (Rafaeli in McMillan and Hwang, 2002). The approach focuses on how users react to messages and make cross references to previous messages in the whole communication process. It fails to acknowledge interactivity as a medium generated process. According to this view, interactivity lies somewhere in between this continuum of message and meaning exchanges. This lack of clarity on the real location of interactivity in the message-centred approach is what prompted scholars to view it as a starting point to the grand narratives of locating this elusive concept (Bucy, 2004, McMillan and Hwang, 2002, Schultz, 1999, Bucy and Tao, 2007, Choi, 2004).

Structural approaches, on the other hand, focus on technological attributes or media features that enable interactive communication. These approaches view interactivity as being objective and relatively homogeneous across users of the same site, as it is more dependent on the attributes of the web site. Great emphasis is placed on technological attributes, ignoring completely the influence of the user's proficiency. According to Bucy (2004), interactivity researchers following structural approaches often regard interactive features as the independent variable and media effects as the dependent variable. From the structural approach perspective, Schultz (1999) conducted a content analysis of 100 U.S. online newspapers and found that Internet sites had the potential to foster interactivity; the only challenge is in the development of the websites to ensure the exploitation of their full potential.

Following the structural perspective, there is a direct link between cyber democracy and interactivity. The findings by Sunder, Karlyanaraman and Brown's study cited in Bucy (2004) support this assertion. They studied the impact of hyperlink structures on political campaign websites and found that the level of website interactivity influenced participants' perceptions of the political candidates as well as their levels of agreement with their (political candidates) policy positions (Bucy 2004). Previously, Sunder, Hesser, Karlyanaraman and Brown had argued that the interactive function of a political website helps to increase the user's empathy and subsequently affinity towards a candidate (Bucy, 2004). Following these researchers' arguments, a political website with the most interactive options is more likely to evoke favourable impressions among users for its candidate.

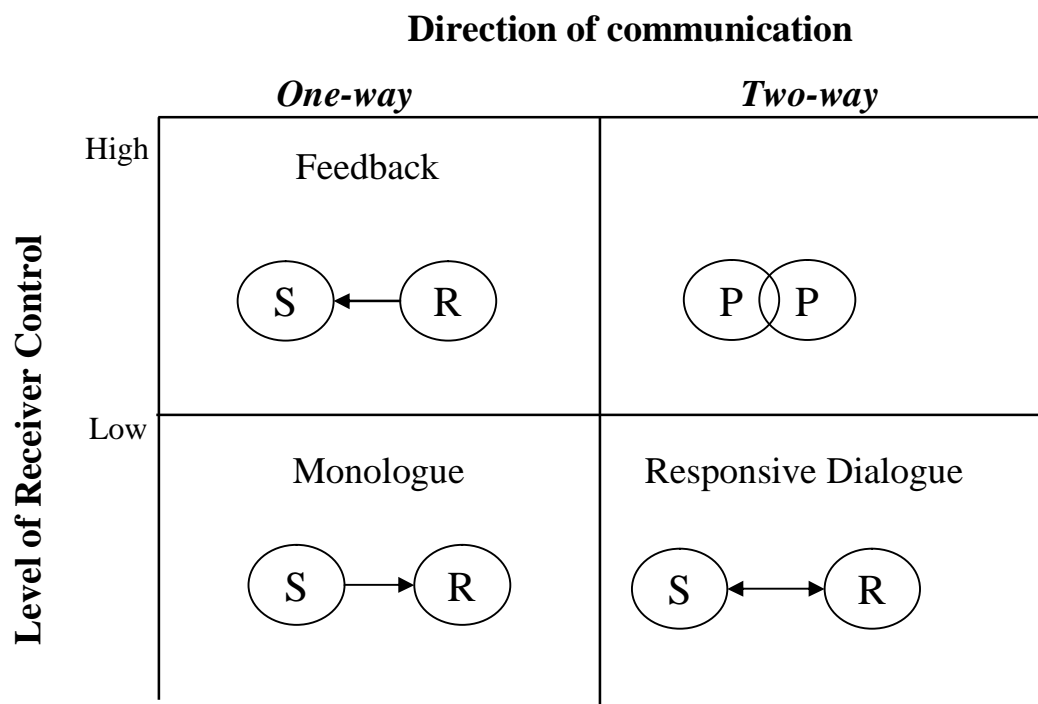
Perceptual approaches to interactivity consider user perceptions as the unit of measure (Bucy, 2004). As explicated by McMillan and Hwang (2002), perceptual approaches view perceived interactivity as the independent variable and tend to ignore technological influence. Explaining further the issue of perceived interactivity, Newhagen, Cordes and Levy (1995) argue that it can be conceptualized as a resultant process of actions of senders and receivers of Internet messages. On one end is the sender interactivity that bears on the Internet message authors' sense of being able to generate effective output messages to a news website, and corresponds to their sense of self efficacy. On the other end is perceived receiver interactivity which deals with the senders' sense that news websites could process their message as useful input, and in some way act on it, and corresponds to the idea of system efficacy. As a result, interactivity takes place as both sender and the receiver acts on these messages. Interactive options are central to both sender's and receiver's perceptions of interactivity because the interaction between the two and their view of system efficacy is enhanced by the availability of interactive devices. This study will adopt Newhagen, Cordes and Levy's (1995) views of interactivity in the use of the MPI model.

2.7.2 The Three-Way Model of Cyber-Interactivity

Building on McMillan's (2002) four part model of cyber-interactivity, Ferber, Foltz and Pugliese (2007) developed a new model of cyber democracy. Central to McMillan's (2002) model are the three dimensions: receiver control of information, control of time and choice of subject. The model purports that one-way communication, which is equivalent to provision of information on websites, is actually monologue. Monologue, then, sometimes elicits feedback, which is still one-way with some limited participation. When this particular feedback from the receiver generates a response from the sender then it further develops into responsive dialogue. However, this level of communication is not yet ideal

for cyber interactivity, until it takes a step further from this and paves the way for mutual discourse. According to McMillan (2002), mutual discourse allows both the sender and the receiver to generate messages. This means their roles can be interchanged. Figure 2.3 illustrates McMillan's (2002) four part model of cyber-interactivity:

The Four-Part Model of Interactivity



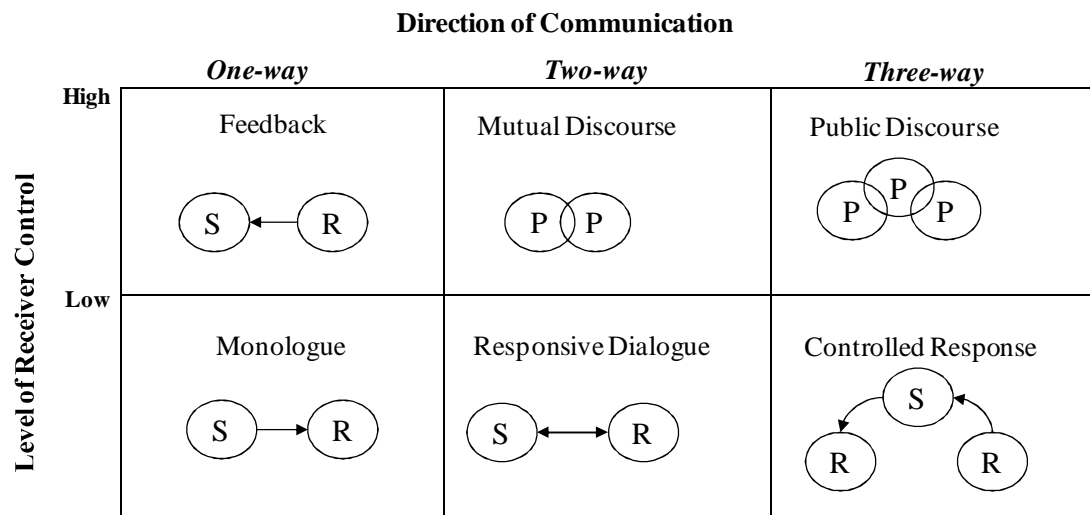
S = sender, R = receiver, P = participant (sender/receiver roles are interchangeable)

Figure 2.3: McMillan (2002) four-part model of cyber-interactivity

Ferber, Foltz and Pugliese (2007) modify McMillan's measures of perceived interactivity model to explain three-way communication that taps into websites' potential for interactivity and public deliberation. They come up with a six part model to explain both interactivity and cyberdemocracy. The six-part model of cyber-interactivity asserts that McMillan's (2002) two-way communication which can be characterised by the provisions of e-mails cannot be used to measure the complexities of cyber-interactivity that other features offer. The fact that e-mails sent to the site's staff or to a politician if it is a political

website, cannot be directly accessed by other site users unless approved, limits this interactive device to two way communication only. For communication to graduate to new levels of three-way communication, a site has to offer interactive tools that allow controlled response, for example features such as polls and bulletin boards, where users have access to other users' responses. Three-way communication is also enabled at an even higher level by the presence of forums and chat rooms. These devices allow for unlimited interaction among participants and offer users an opportunity to control content. Figure 2.4 presents Ferber, Foltz and Pugliese's (2007) six-part model of cyber-interactivity:

The Six-Part Model of Cyber-interactivity:



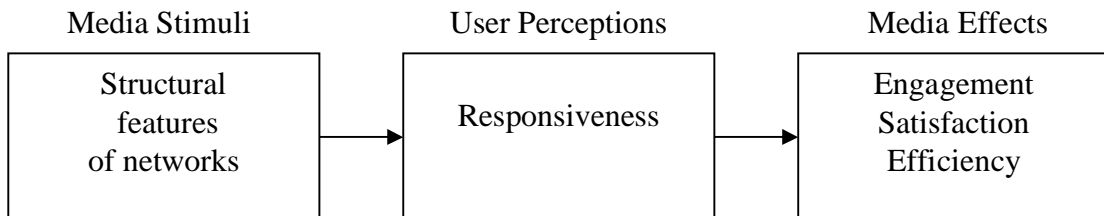
S = sender, R = receiver, P = participant (sender/receiver roles are interchangeable)

Figure 2.4: Six-part model of cyber-interactivity Ferber *et al*, (2007)

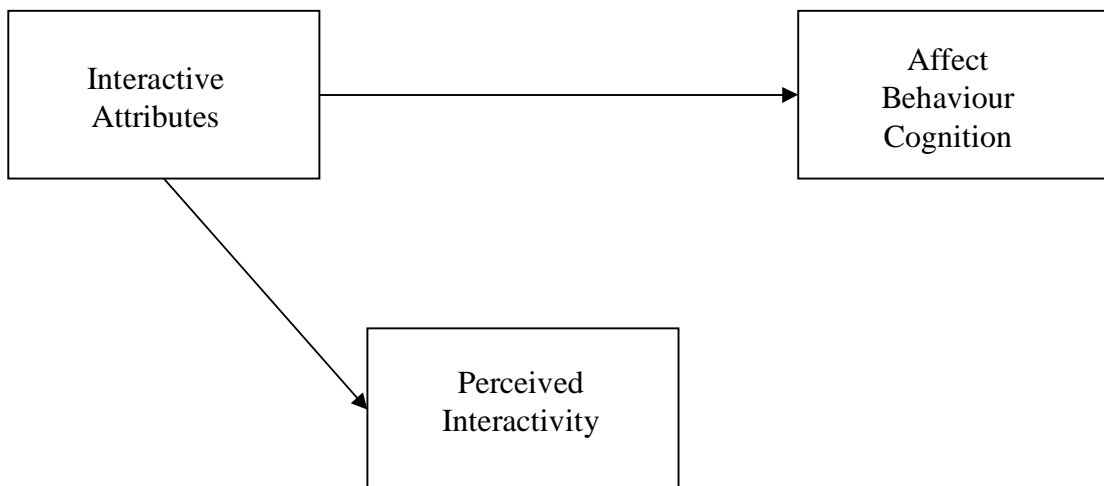
Both the six-part model and the four-part models of cyber-interactivity provide important tools for the analysis of a website's potential to promote cyber democracy.

The Mediated Moderation Model

- i. Message-centred approach: Structural features of networks as the independent variable, responsiveness as the dependent variable



- ii. Structural approach: interactive attributes as the independent variable, media effects as the dependent variable, perceived interactivity as the manipulation check



- iii. Perceptual approach: Perceived interactivity as the independent variable, media effects as the dependent variable

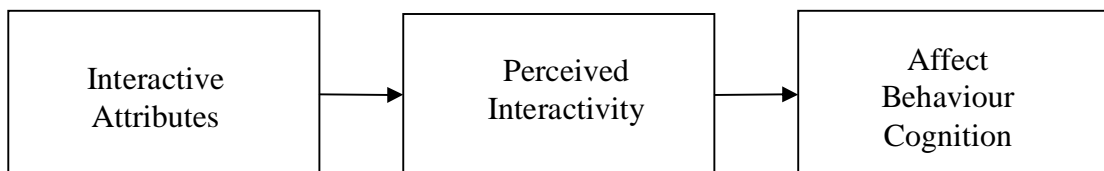


Figure 2.5: Conceptual models of interactivity classified by the unit of measure (Bucy and Tao, 2007).

However, none of these approaches can adequately and holistically explain interactivity, as they are all confined within the limits of their unit of measure. As a response to the limitations of previous approaches, Bucy and Tao (2007) advocate the mediated moderation model which seeks to establish the missing link among the message-centred, structural and perceptual approaches. The gap between these approaches is closed by bringing a third variable in the form of a moderator variable to the study of interactivity. The mediated moderation approach, according to Bucy (2007), is modelled around effects of four defining factors, all with similar levels of significance to explaining interactivity:

- a. Interactivity – the independent variable
- b. Perceived interactivity – the mediator variable
- c. Individual differences – the moderator variable
- d. Media effects – the dependent variable

Following Bucy and Tao's (2007) illustration in Figure 2.5, interactivity lies in media attributes, technological features and modes of presentation. They advocate a narrow focus of interactivity to technological attributes or mediated environments that enable reciprocal communication or information exchange, which afford interaction between communication technology and users or between users and technology. The unit of measure according to this view should be interactive tools (Bucy and Tao, 2007; Rosenberry, 2005; Schultz, 1999; Massey and Levy, 1999; Choi, 2004). Interactive tools should then enable message sending or retrieval and even manipulation of content. Summing up the relationship between interactivity and the user, Bucy and Tao (2007) further acknowledge that the objective existence of interactive attributes does not guarantee the subjective experience of the user. Other variables such as the mediator variable, the moderator variable and Internet

self-efficacy have some bearing on actual interactivity. The mediator variable can be explained as an “intervening” variable or that which causes communication to take place. The mediator variable is also equated to functions of “cognitive mechanisms”; in other words, the user’s understanding and grasp of interactivity serves as the mediatory factor, while a moderation variable serves as a reserve from which the user taps into in times of need throughout the whole interactivity process (Bucy and Tao, 2007). Interactivity can still take place without moderation, yet the mediator variable is a pre-requisite, as illustrated in Figure 2.6.

Mediated Moderation Model

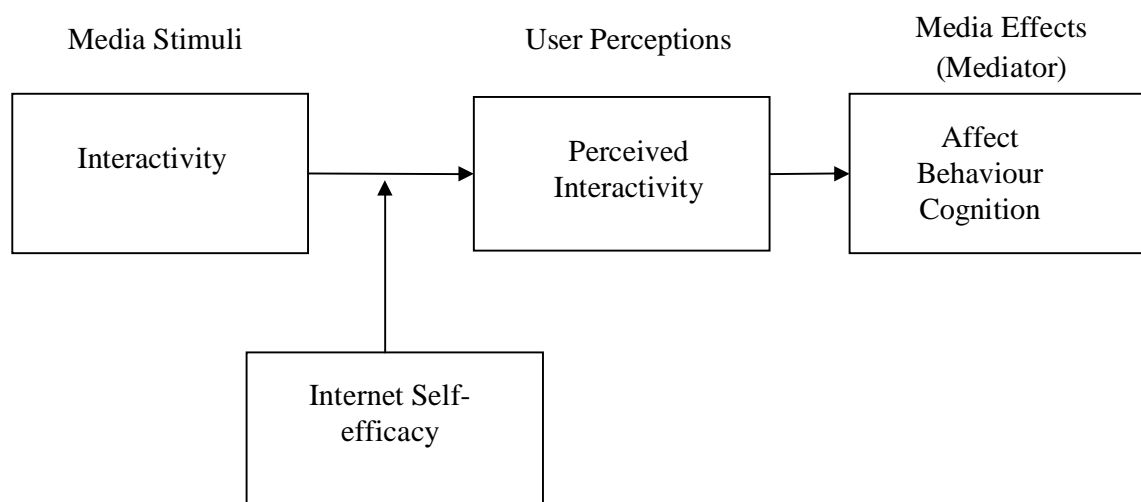


Figure 2.6: The mediated moderation model of interactivity (Bucy and Tao 2007).

Figure 2.6 shows how interactivity affects behaviour in general. However, in this study the interest is on the basis of interactivity and its subsequent impact on users, especially with reference to political awareness.

2.8 The Interface between Interactivity and Cyber democracy

The political impact of the Internet is discussed from a wide range of stand points addressing different issues such as “access, technological determinism, encryption, commodification, intellectual property, the public sphere, decentralization, anarchy, gender and ethnicity” (Poster in Trend, 2001:259). Scholars who have focused on the enlightening power of the Internet in terms of political communication view the Internet as a public sphere (Poster, 1995; Rosenberry, 2005; Ferber *et al*, 2004).

The role of the Internet in the democratisation process is crucial as Poster in Trend (2001: 261) acknowledges: “While the Internet is often accused of elitism, there does exist growing and vibrant grass-roots participation.... In the absence of a coherent alternative political programme the best one can do is to examine phenomena such as the Internet in relation to new forms of the old democracy, while holding open the possibility that what emerges might be something other than democracy in any shape that we conceive given our embeddedness in the present”. This forms the basis for investigating cyber democracy in the Zimbabwean case as the non existence of an alternative political communication programme has become obvious.

However, interactivity as a defining characteristic of the Internet provides the link to the attainment of a democracy closer to our conception of the term. As Ferber *et al* (2004) point out; the concept of cyber democracy emphasizes the ability of the interactive nature of websites to boost participation in politics and civic affairs. As summarised by Poster in Trend (2001: 261), democracy simply means “the rule by all”. Comparing such a definition to the reality in Zimbabwe shows an unprecedented level of unfulfilled promises of freedom and equality. Therefore, exploring democracy in the form of cyber-democracy

might provide a “means to name the new patterns of force relations emerging in certain parts of the Internet” (Poster in Trend, 2001: 261). Bearing in mind that advocates of cyber democracy place great emphasis on the interactive nature of websites (Ferber *et al*, 2004), the inclusion of interactivity literature becomes an informing basis on which cyber democracy studies should be premised.

From a historical perspective, Mazango (2005) views the growth and nurturing of democracy as a resultant factor of the institutionalization of mediating mechanisms such as electoral systems, representative assemblies, and a free press. The meaning of democracy therefore, shows a further delicate relation with the practices of publicity and mediation. He further laments that public media is one of the key mediating mechanisms of modern day representation, playing a very important role in facilitating political debate and the circulation of ideas and opinions. The mediatory role of the media is what proponents of cyber democracy seek to improve through interactivity. Similarly, Ferber *et al*, (2004) argue that website designs should encourage interaction with government officials and offer opportunities to provide input into the decision-making process to maintain cyber democracy. Aptly for this study, an exploration of interactivity will form a basis for studying (cyber) democracy in a context where other traditional forms are non existent.

Feber, Foltz and Pugliese (2004) analysed interactivity and interaction on 50 United States state legislative websites with a view to determine the degree to which interactive features were present. Interactive features were distinguished as those that reflect a two-way exchange between the user and site, including the ability of the user to modify the exchange. Features that met their interactivity criteria were public forums, online polls, and active email links to legislators, active email links to webmasters or other technical

personnel. They investigated only those interactive features relevant to democracy. Their study reveals that these websites provide e-government rather than promote cyber democracy. Their bone of contention stemmed from the sites' lack of any kind of civic discussion, such as forums and polls that promote cyber democracy. They found features that facilitate citizen-legislator top-down communication not allowing for citizen response. In this particular study, interactivity was conceptualised as the basis of cyber democracy.

Building on Shultz's (1999) content analysis of interactive options, Rosenberry (2005), reviews U.S. online news sites to evaluate the presence of interactive devices that set the ground for cyber democracy. Based on the findings of the study, Rosenberry (2005) agrees with previous scholars (Kartz, 1994; Newhagen, Cordes and Levy, 1995; Feber, Foltz and Pugliese, 2004) on the untapped status of the Internet's potential for improved political communication (cyber democracy). Most editors view the Internet as a medium with advantages regarding speed of publication and depth of information presented (Rosenberry 2005). In light of this revelation, editors, then, focus on improving this platform mainly for their advantage. Interactive possibilities are not fully exploited as they would give the user an advantage over the editors. It can also be deduced that even cyber democracy is introduced reluctantly as bait for the user. This is also supported by Davis in Feber, Foltz and Pugliese, (2004) who finds that a succession of twentieth century communication technologies, including radio and television, did not truly upset power structures or cause breakthroughs in public participation. He acknowledges that the Internet has changed the shape of political processes and institutions, but also observes that traditional political actors are adapting to it.

Bimber in Poster (1995) finds no empirical relationship between increased

communication/information and political engagement, and argues that the Internet will cause "accelerated pluralism," altering the structure of political power but not necessarily leading to a new era of democracy. This could be because the Internet's potential to promote democracy is not fully in place yet. The users are still not as proficient as they are supposed to be in order to make use of the Internet as a democratising medium. The Internet also presents information to a fragmented audience, which does not work in favour of promoting democracy. Thus, users have to formulate opinions as isolated individuals while a thriving democracy requires citizens to be mobilised as a group (Tsagaraousianou *et al*, 1998). In a democratic situation people have to come together and express their views freely and openly.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a broad overview of the research methodology to be employed in this study. It provides the theoretical basis for the quantitative and qualitative methods to be used. Quantitative methods will be used to determine the presence of interactive devices that lay the foundation for cyber democracy. The chapter will also give a detailed description of how both quantitative and qualitative research methods will be used to answer questions raised earlier on in this study.

3.2 Quantitative Content Analysis

As explained earlier in this study, a quantitative content analysis was employed to determine the presence of interactive options on Zimbabwean news websites. Following Berelson's most widely quoted description of a content analysis as a "research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication" (Deacon *et al*, 1999: 115; Riffe *et al*, 1998: 24), an actual count of the interactive devices was done to ascertain their presence on the websites. The definition emphasises objectivity as the central tenet of this study, with neutrality guaranteed in the systematic search for the presence of interactive devices. The presence of interactive tools is an objective fact that can be easily verified. The definition's claim to scientific accuracy as is enhanced by its quest for 'manifest' phenomena is also a key issue in the selection of this research technique.

A quantitative content analysis is also defined by Stempel (2003: 209) as "a formal system

for doing something we all do informally rather frequently – draw conclusions from observations of content”. Interestingly, this definition highlights that a content analysis is not uncommon as people seem to do it rather intuitively in their everyday lives. As a quantitative research technique, therefore, a content analysis provides a systematic explanation to simple and mundane human activities. This tie in with the purpose of a content analysis as advocated by Deacon *et al* (1999: 116) that it is to “quantify salient and manifest features of a large number of texts and the statistics are used to make broader inferences about the processes and politics of representations.” From a quantitative content analysis of interactivity devises, broader inferences can thus be drawn.

Similar views of a content analysis are echoed by Gerbner (1969) who describes it as “a method that aims to produce a ‘big picture’ (delineating trends, patterns and absences over large aggregates of texts), well suited to deal with the ‘massness’ of mass media.” (Deacon *et al*, 1999: 117). In the same way, the findings of the content analysis in this study will be used as a basis for drawing broader inferences about the communication context, in its quest to lay the ground for cyber democracy.

A more comprehensive and all-encompassing explanation of content analysis is offered by Riffe *et al* (1998: 25) who states, “Quantitative content analysis is the systematic and replicable examination of symbols of communication, which have been assigned numeric values according to valid measurement rules and the analysis of relationships involving those values using statistical methods, to describe the communication, draw inferences about its meaning, or infer from the communication to its context, both of production and consumption.” Apart from giving a summative scope of a content analysis, this explication also delineates the contexts of inferences to extend to the producers. Quite relevant to this

study is the notion that inferences about the presence or absence of interactive devices can be attributed to both production and consumption communication contexts.

Literature on how to conduct a quantitative content analysis is very specific on what has to be counted or the unit of analysis (Deacon *et al*, 1999). In this study the unit of analysis was the interactive devices. A count of the interactive devices was conducted as well as their user frequencies over a period of two weeks during Zimbabwe's run-up to the March 2008 presidential elections. A content analysis was used in this research for both the study and analysis of interactive devices. The research technique was purposively chosen for the reason that "it is the lone technique suitable for gathering information about what communications contain." (Thomas, 2003: 59).

Taking into account the positivist approach in media and cultural studies communication research includes using a content analysis to tap into the advantages offered by scientific enquiries. Scientific enquiry methods as suggested in the definitions of a content analysis by Deacon *et al* (1999) and Thomas (2003) are hailed for upholding issues of "reliability, objectivity, and clarity..." (Riffe *et al*, 1998:26). However, all these positive merits of a content analysis do not bring in other complex phenomena underlying communication contexts. As Gerbner points out, it is the latent rather than manifest levels of meaning that show the "big picture" (Deacon *et al*, 1999: 117). To help bring out the latent function of the presence or absence of interactive tools, qualitative procedures were used to supplement the quantitative content analysis.

3.3 The Research Sample for the Content Analysis

The sample comprised 22 of the Zimbabwean online newspapers selected from a sampling

described elsewhere in this study. The news websites had to match the criteria for news delivery set by the researcher. A content analysis of Zimbabwean online newspapers was conducted to search for interactive tools. The content analysis involved counting the number of times each interactive device was available on the site over a two week period prior to the 2008 March elections. Each time an interactive option was available on the site, it was recorded.

The unit of analysis was an interactive device. The researcher did not have to read through articles on the entire website. The study focused on the availability of interactive tools such as e-mail links, chat rooms, blogs, online polls, and discussion forums as discussed earlier in this study.

At a structural level, the roles of these interactive options were reviewed against the backdrop of Shultz's (1999) explication as follows:

- E-mail can serve as a fast, asynchronous means of interpersonal communication between journalists and readers. It can also be used for reactive question-and-answer sessions. General e-mail addresses are regularly provided by many newspaper websites to elicit responses from readers. However, this will have to be studied more systematically, especially to determine whether editors and reporters really respond to the queries of the readers via these e-mails.

- Live chats can enable reactive communication, as well as interactive synchronous communication. Many chat areas on the Internet are open to any topic and they often develop from topical issues. Journalistic chat rooms could be guided by moderating hosts on defined topics thereby giving audiences some form of

guidance but not censorship that could lead to rational discussion.

- Online polls and surveys could be offered on news Web sites as a means to afford audiences a platform to express their opinion. Online polls and surveys are somewhat problematic because they usually do not meet scientific standards (Wu & Weaver, in Shultz, 1999). They fail to be representative because it is often possible to cast multiple votes. They can be useful tools to initiate discussions. Once online polls and surveys are informed by background information and discussions, they can become part of a communicative effort that will evolve to reach an interactive level.

- Online forums are another powerful tool for interactive attempts. They especially widen opportunities for reader-to-reader communication. Using postings that are displayed on the Web, readers can comment on articles and news topics. Ideally, this leads to inspiring, instructive discussions (Shultz, 1999).

Coding did not only include quantitative categories, but qualitative notes as well. The notes provided data that would have been missed out due to a total reliance on quantitative methods. In this way it was possible to obtain more specific information on encountered interactive options, especially on the topics and structures of chats, polls, and forums, the types of forums and chat rooms hosted and the kinds of topics which were polled. Coding was performed by the researcher.

3.4 Qualitative Research Methods: the Case of Self Completion Interview Questions

The study used qualitative research methods in self-completion interview questionnaires. The researcher drafted interview questions (see appendix) and e-mailed them to the online editors of the Zimbabwean news websites. Each site had e-mail links to the editors. This was also a way of determining whether online editors responded to email messages posted on their sites, as it was noted by Newhagen, Cordes, and Levy (1995) that editors of a newscast did not even look at e-mails from their audience, although they had encouraged people to send in their comments.

Adopting this qualitative research procedure had a lot of advantages for this study. The method worked well, to provide answers to the key research questions set at the beginning of the study. According to Deacon *et al* (1999: 64) this method presents “the most structured form of questioning because no intermediary is involved in presenting the questions or recording the answers.” Using this method, a set of interview questions was sent to the online editors to which they responded in their own time and e-mailed back to the researcher. The same set of standardised questions was sent to each online editor, together with an introductory letter explaining the researcher’s intention and an informed consent form in line with the university’s ethical rules.

The qualitative research method employed in this study was not only limited to self-completion interview questionnaires sent to the online editors, but also included notes that the researcher made during the content analysis of interactive options. These notes enabled the researcher to obtain specific information on encountered interactive options, especially on topics and structures of chats, polls, and forums among other devices (Shultz, 1999).

3.5 Research Data Analysis

3.5.1 Using Shultz's Index of Feedback Options

Following Shultz's (1999) arguments on the analysis of interactive devices in an exploratory content analysis of 100 U.S. online newspapers, the index of feedback options developed thereafter was adopted in this study. Shultz's (1999) index of analysis also informed the content analysis stage of this study. The index of analysis assigns values to the interactive devices according to their sophistication and significance for interactive communication as shown in Table 3.1:

Table 3.1: Index of Feedback Options and the Allotted Points (Shultz 1999)

Index of Feedback Options	Points
General e-mail address(es) to contact newsroom	1 pt
List of at least some editors'/writers' e-mail (limited) or: List of editors'/writers' e-mail addresses (general pattern)	1 pt 2 pts
E-mail links to at least some articles' authors (limited) or: E-mail links to articles' authors (general pattern)	1 pt 2 pts
E-mail links to politicians/officials	1 pt
Discussion forum(s) or: Discussion forum(s) obviously hosted/journalists participate	2 pts 3 pts
Chat room(s) provided or: Chat room(s) obviously hosted/journalists participate	1 pt 3 pts
Quick poll/user survey or Sophisticated poll/survey (open questions/linked to forum/background info)	1 pt 3 pts
Letters to the editor displayed online	1 pt
MAXIMUM (MINIMUM)	16pts 0pt

According to Shultz (1999), the assumptions informing the construction of this index of analysis were based on logical principles. The number of points per interactive option was assigned based on the theoretical view of its embedded potential to afford interactivity; for instance, it was appropriate to weight discussion forums more heavily than simple quick polls, which are not embedded in any further discursive effort. While quick polls create reactive communication, discussion forums go beyond this to afford users an opportunity to ponder on issues and give their own views of them. Some interactive options, for example polls, limit users to operate merely on a reactive level. Based on this criterion, the index offers a scale that ranges from a maximum of 16 to a minimum of 0 points for each web site. Applying this index, therefore, entails that a newspaper website will score highly only if it offers different and sophisticated feedback options, which encourage interactive

communication.

The investigation was done over a two week period just before the March 2008 Zimbabwean elections. The time frame was selected specifically because it was the height of the combined parliamentary, senatorial and presidential election campaigns. From the selected news sites, interactive devices were reviewed and analysed within the context of the characteristics drawn from cyber-democratic theory following Rosenberry (2005):

- Putting institutional authority behind citizen voices, as indicated by the presence of blogs, e-mail posting and submission of letters to the editor and online polls
- Creating places for citizen interaction on public affairs issues, operationalized by threaded and non-threaded message boards about public affairs, links to discussion sites and chats with other citizens
- Creating places for citizen interaction with officials, operationalized by email links to candidates, officials and institutions and chats with officials
- Combining institutional and citizen voices, operationalized by citizen input (e.g. from message boards and blogs) used in stories, and/or editorials and the opportunity to “talk back” on a story, editorial or letter to the editor
- Using interactive devices to present public affairs information serving the surveillance function, operationalized by interactive storytelling, selections and links (other than e-mail) to sites such as government sites with general information or voting information as well as election-related material, including candidates’ personal/campaign sites and third-party information/advocacy sites.

Using the Three-Way Model to Analyse Interactive Options

The internet can provide users with a mechanism for intelligent discussions enabled by

interactive devices that inform the participants on political choices through public deliberations (Ferber, Foltz and Pugliese, 2007). To clarify the vagueness surrounding the promises of interactivity to promote cyber democracy, Ferber, Foltz and Pugliese (2007) used the three-way model to analyse interactive options and attach some numeric value to the various interactive devices in relation to their roles in cyber democracy. Table 3.2 indicates the interactive devices with their corresponding values:

Table 3.2: Analysis of Interactive Features

Feature	Direction	Receiver Control
Active e-mail to legislators and/or contact forms	1-way	high
Active e-mail and/or contact forms to webmaster	1-way	high
Site search engine	2-way	low
Interactive aids to navigation (online help)	2-way	high
Interactive educational material	2-way	low
Personalized site layouts	2-way	low
Online polling	3-way	low
Public forums	3-way	high

Source : Ferber, Foltz and Pugliese's (2007) analysis of interactive features.

* 1-way is simply feedback while, 2-way communication occurs when a receiver gets a response. 3-way communication is multilateral message flow.

In this study the three-way communication model will be used to analyse the contributions of the interactive devices to promoting cyber democracy. The model provides guidelines for analysis that attach value to each interactive option in terms of how much interactivity is enshrined in that particular device that can empower users. The model also provides a rating scale for examining how much control the user is empowered with when each interactive device is made available on a website.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on compiling and presenting the findings of the research. The data obtained from the quantitative content analysis, qualitative notes and qualitative interview questions will be presented and explained in this chapter.

4.2 Quantitative Content Analysis Research Findings

A quantitative content analysis was carried out largely to ascertain the presence of interactive devices on the Zimbabwean Web newspapers. As stated earlier in this study, the exploration of the websites was done over a two week period prior to the March Zimbabwean elections. Being a time frame that coincided with intense campaigns, it was reasonably assumed that interactive options had to be popularly used to follow political developments in the online communities. The results of the content analysis of the interactive devices on 22 websites are presented in Table 4.1:

4.2.1 Summary of Content Analysis Findings

Table 4.1: Interactive Features on Zimbabwean Online Newspapers

Interactive Feature	Frequencies	No of Newspapers
General e-mail addresses to contact newsroom	125	9
List e-mail addresses to editors/writers (limited)	77	7
List of editors/writers' e-mail addresses (general pattern)	18	2
E-mail links to at least some articles/authors (limited)	19	2
E-mail links articles/authors (general pattern)	0	0
E-mail links to politicians/officials	7	1
E-mails to friends initiated by news/forums	24	3
Discussion forum(s)	56	6
Discussion forum(s) obviously hosted/journalists participate	19	2
Chat room(s) provided	20	2
Chat room(s) obviously hosted/journalists participate	7	1
Quick poll/user survey	12	1
Sophisticated survey/poll (open question/linked to forum/background info)	2	1
Letters to the editor displayed on the site	52	7
Blogs	25	6
Phone Number to The Editor	10	2
Mobile Phone Campaign (SMS services)	19	2
Total	492	

4.2.2 E-mail

Most of the newspaper sites (73% of the news sites) in the sample studied had an e-mail facility to contact newsroom, staff or friends. Only 4 out of the 22 sites studied did not offer any e-mail addresses at all. These 4 fell under the state-controlled newspapers whose presence online mirrors the image of their print versions.

On almost all the sites, the e-mail facility is used to facilitate feedback from the readers or merely to contact the newsroom to post an article. 97% of the e-mail facilities on the websites were designed to facilitate one way or down-up communication. For instance, in

the sample studied the most popular e-mail link was to provide a means for the reader to contact the newsroom. Of the 97% frequency of e-mail use, 51% was for general purposes to contact newsroom. Only 12 of the 22 news sites had this type of e-mail link. On most sites the general e-mail addresses were the most popular feedback tools and were not linked to any specific published article. This facility enabled users to contact the webmaster with general queries.

The second most popular e-mail facilities were e-mail addresses to writers and editors. Eight of the sites in the sample studied provided email addresses to writers or editors. 31% of the times, the-mail addresses available were of limited pattern, meaning that some writers and editors did not supply their email addresses. Most of these e-mail addresses provided were of high ranking editors, not the writers of the articles. Under this category, the availability of the e-mail links was limited to a few writers or editors. 31% frequency on the list of e-mail addresses to editors/writers (limited) was considered quite high compared to the list of editors/writers' e-mail addresses (general pattern) which had a 7% frequency. The general pattern offers a better opportunity for reactive response, which might in turn trigger interactivity. This is mainly because they will provide direct e-mail links to the authors of specific stories.

Very few sites provided e-mail links to at least some articles/authors of a limited pattern (9%). These sites displayed limited links to some previous articles or authors. For instance, on one of these sites one article provided a link to the author's blog. Following this link one could easily trace the development of events by making references to previous ones. The e-mail link of this type was limited to a few individual authors and articles. However, none of the sites offered this feature as a general pattern.

Most online newspapers (95%) in this sample did not provide e-mail links to politicians. The sites that offered this option consistently used it with a 3% frequency of appearance. The e-mail links of this nature provided were sometimes of quite high ranking politicians, which ushered in an ideal situation for cyber democracy if this interactive device were to be utilized by both the politicians and the users. Another interactive device that featured not very prominently (10% frequency) was e-mail links to friends initiated by news or discussion forums. This interactive feature was offered on 3 of the newspaper sites studied. E-mail links to friends initiated by news or discussion forums were a common feature that sparked heated debate as users posted their opinion on news and topical issues. These culminated in discussion forums, another interactive feature to be reported on in this study. Table 4.2 summarizes the different types of e-mail links offered on the sites explored.

Table 4.2: Online Newspapers that Offered E-mail Facilities

Interactive Feature	Frequency	Percentages	News Sites
General e-mail addresses to contact newsroom	125	51%	12
List of e-mail addresses to editors/writers (limited)	77	31%	8
List of editors/writers' e-mail addresses (general pattern)	18	7%	2
E-mail links to at least some articles/authors (limited)	19	8%	2
E-mail links to articles/authors (general pattern)	0	0	0
E-mail links to politicians/officials	7	3%	1
E-mails to friends initiated by news/forums	24	10%	3
Total	270	110%	28

4.2.3 Discussion Forums

Table 4.3: Online Newspapers with Discussion Forums

Interactive Feature	Frequency	Number of News Sites
Discussion forum(s)	56	6
Discussion forum(s) obviously hosted/journalists participate	19	2

Six out of the 22 online newspapers studied offered discussion forums as shown in Table 4.3. All of these online newspapers that offered discussion forums required registration for one to participate. To register, four of these requested a potential participant to supply name, email address and password. The other two websites only required a simple registration, asking for e-mail address and password for one to register. All the same, a registration procedure of some kind was a pre-requisite for one to participate.

One type of a discussion forum of a higher level and hosted by a participating journalist was offered on *SW Radio Africa*. The newspaper site ran a discussion forum under the title 'reporter(s) forum', clearly indicating the participation of journalists. The forum was mainly an audio forum hosted by an award-winning journalist. The outcome of the discussion forum was not available in text; to access it, a user had to play it as an audio

file. That it was displayed on the home page with other articles available in written texts was probably for publicity purposes.

Discussion forums hosted by journalists were held on *New Zimbabwe.com* and *Zimdaily.com*. The two news sites had organised forums under a wide range of categories. Under each category specific topics were discussed. Classes of discussion forums on both sites ranged from general discussion, relationships, music and entertainment, education and student forums, to audience with a politician. On both sites the discussion forums were moderated by journalists. However, no transcripts of these discussion forums were displayed on the site.

On the contrary, some of the outcomes of discussion forums were transcribed into news articles. In this way the participation of journalists was undisputable. For instance *New Zimbabwe.com* and *SW Radio Africa* ran articles featuring a journalist and a guest speaker(s). During the run-up to the March elections an interview was held with an opposition politician. The title of a report on the interview read 'Bennet claims western diplomats are imposing Makoni' (Roy Bennet is a former MDC legislator while Simba Makoni is a leader of the faction that had just broken away from Mugabe's Zanu PF party). Under this category of discussion forums, experts in different fields, professionals and politicians were called to a programme entitled 'Hot Seat', hosted by a journalist. The journalists would interview the guest participants and the proceedings would be broadcast on an independent radio channel. The whole interview session was then transcribed verbatim and published on the two news websites. This interactive process, though elitist in the sense that only individuals with a certain clout qualified to participate, gave general readers an insight into the characters of people who held public office. The information

conveyed in the articles published from these kinds of forums also helped readers to make informed decisions.

Only one site (*Zimdaily.com*) ran discussion forums related to news articles. Participants on this forum still had to follow the same registration procedure. The participants posted their responses to a news article, commenting sometimes on the authenticity of the information presented. Most of the time, the debates would deteriorate into a war of words among the participants. These debates sometimes supplied new information the article had missed. The participation of journalists in this particular forum was not quite evident. Users sometimes posted vulgar outbursts so much so that one would wonder if there was any journalist checking the postings before they were displayed on the newspaper site.

However, the actual level of interactivity cannot be easily determined by merely looking at the Internet postings of the discussions. The potential that such forums have for providing a platform for participants to deliberate on topical issues is what was considered.

4.2.4 Blogs

Twenty-seven percent of Zimbabwe's online newspapers offer blogs. Blogs on all these news sites were frequently updated and contained topical information. The blogs were dated and the pattern tallied with daily news information. Information contained on these blogs seemed to be quite similar to news articles. The only difference was most of the bloggers appeared to follow a certain format of writing, in most cases a feature writing format. Apart from presenting news articles, on a site such as *Change Zimbabwe*, bloggers posted general information. Bloggers on this site seemed to be correspondents for the site as the blog section had similar news to that on the website.

On a news website such as *SW Radio Africa* for example, individual blog pages were displayed with hyperlinks. The blogs section was clearly marked “Kick Mugabe Out”. Under the heading, a list of individual bloggers was presented. Merely clicking on any one of these blogs, would lead a reader to an array of that particular blogger’s postings. All the bloggers presented political information illustrated by pictures of rallies that were taking place all over Zimbabwe at the time. Judging from the umbrella title itself, most of these postings would never have been published in Zimbabwe’s traditional media. For instance, on one of the blogs on this site was an opposition’s political advert that had been banned in the mainstream media. Quite evident in these blogs was the individual bloggers’ resort to the Internet as a medium for a more personal and intimate engagement with political information and to evade censorship of the opinions of editors. Bloggers seemed to claim their own territory for both their personal as well as others’ benefit. A welcome note to one of the blogs on *SW Radio Africa* read:

Among other things, the opinions of a blogger, writer, singer, son, brother, father and husband. My take on the world in general and one thing in particular - a commentary on the current political climate in Zimbabwe. I am not a journalist, nor a political activist, but I am a man with a conscience. Hence, this page is my civic responsibility. The more people that hear about the devastating rule in Zimbabwe and the real problems therein, the better!

The blogger together with the rest of the bloggers on the sites used blogs to expose the injustices and devastating policies of the Mugabe regime. They used this facility to vent their frustrations as well as to create awareness in readers and other citizens of the evils the regime has brought. Blogging was not seen as ‘a play thing’, but assumed a more serious stance that can be compared to journalism in the

traditional media. The claim by the blogger that he was neither a journalist nor a political activist was a mere confession that he was a citizenry journalist with a strong conviction and a role to play in the current political climate. That role could only be played through facilitation and the provision of appropriate interactive facilities on news websites.

4.2.5 Online Polls and Surveys

Two of the 22 online newspapers in the sample conducted polls and surveys. These two newspaper sites mainly featured simple quick polls that asked readers about their preferred candidates during the run-up to the March elections in Zimbabwe. Though the elections were harmonized (presidential, parliamentary and local government), the main focus was on the presidential vote. Polls were conducted to ask the readers' perspectives on the presidential candidates. Table 4.4 is an example of the quick poll survey conducted on *Zimdaily.Com* during the run-up to the March elections.

This type of quick poll only required the participant to click on the preferred candidate and send the results back. There was no provision made for extra comments. Only after sending the vote would a participant access the results of the overall survey. In this particular type of quick poll survey, not only were users given an opportunity to reflect on their preferred candidate, but they were also made aware of the presidential aspirants.

Table 4.4: Online poll**Quickvote**

Who will win March 29 election?	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Robert Mugabe
<input type="checkbox"/>	Simba Makoni
<input type="checkbox"/>	Arthur Mutambara
<input type="checkbox"/>	Morgan Tsvangirai
Vote	

Results

Who will win March 29 election?		
Robert Mugabe	<div><div></div></div>	8%
Simba Makoni	<div><div></div></div>	49%
Arthur Mutambara	<div><div></div></div>	2%
Morgan Tsvangirai	<div><div></div></div>	41%

Source: *Zimdaily.com*

This poll topic also added to the mood and frenzy that engulfed Zimbabweans during the run-up to the March elections. It captured their hopes and aspirations in politics. Multiple votes were possible during the period the survey ran. One would be able to vote on each and every day the poll was up on the site. The only time a participant was blocked was when they tried to vote twice on the same day. The site also barred participants from voting twice even with different logins: as long as it

was from the same Internet account, one was barred from voting more than once on the same day.

Simple poll surveys were also conducted on *Newsnet*, a facility of one of Zimbabwe's mainstream media organization sites. *Newsnet* is one of mainstream media's sites, the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Holdings (ZBH). On this site, it was not clear how a participant was supposed to vote. A question was posed with an invitation to vote. Clicking on the word 'vote' or on the question would not lead one anywhere. No answer categories were given; therefore the purpose of the poll survey on this site was not identified. None of the newspapers in the sample studied used sophisticated poll surveys with open-ended questions.

4.2.6 Letters to the Editor

Four out of the 22 Zimbabwean online newspapers in the sample studied displayed letters to the editors on their site. These online newspapers fell under the independent category of the Zimbabwean media. Letters to the editor during the run-up to the March 2008 elections also embodied the spirit of freedom that writers were experiencing in the hope that was revived by elections. Most of the writers' articles focused on voting, electoral candidates, and some on politicians believed to be opportunistic. Letters entitled: "Vote with "Gukurahundi (the genocide in Matabeleland soon after Zimbabwe got independent from colonialism) in mind", "Lets not split the vote", "Qualities needed by a president", "So the dogs are out again March 29th", "Buying votes from civil servants", "A tip for voters", "Lets have a white neutral leader", "Bronze not gold Makoni" among others, were posted and displayed on *The Zimbabwean*, one of the online newspapers that had this

feedback tool.

The subject of the letters was not different in all the online newspapers that offered and displayed letters to the editor. The letters to the editor almost resemble blogs in style of writing and choice of subject. It was quite apparent that writers to the editor used this opportunity to warn fellow readers and to help make sense of the political climate that was prevalent at the time.

None of the state-controlled online newspapers displayed letters to the editor. One would expect that newspapers that offer letters to the editor in their print versions would also do the same in their online versions. Yet an exploration of the state-controlled websites revealed the same rigidity as displayed in their print versions, if not worse, by leaving out the only feedback facility that can be found in their prints.

4.2.7 Other Interactive Features

Chat rooms: Three out of the 22 online newspapers explored offered chat rooms. All the three online newspapers offered asynchronous chats and were mainly for social chats. For instance, *Zimdaily.com* offered its own chat room known as “Zimface”. This was a mere social utility feature that connects Zimbabweans across the globe. No specific topics were offered on these chat rooms. Users visited them to experience an online sense of belonging and to reconnect with former high school friends. As the name of the example of this chat room suggests, it was designed mainly for young people who would want to connect to each other through cyberspace just for the fun of it. Users were more likely to form sub-groups, depending on their unique and various interests. None of the online newspapers

offered synchronous chats and journalists were neither participating nor hosting.

Frequency of interactive options other than the ones described in Section 4.2 was very low, close to being insignificant relative to the goals of this study. Only one site offered mobile phone campaign (SMS services), the implementation of which was difficult to establish save for the fact that it was displayed on the home page of the site.

Two online newspapers (*SW Radio Africa* and *Change Zimbabwe*) offered phone numbers to the editor. The two sites already offered other cost-effective interactive tools, so one would predict a low acceptance of this phone service as a feedback tool.

4.3 Qualitative Research Procedures: Research Findings

The researcher conducted e-mail interviews with the editors of the online newspapers studied in this sample. To get in touch with the editors, the researcher used the contact details supplied on the websites. As noted in Section 4.2.2, 73% of the news sites had e-mail facilities to contact the news room. The researcher used these available e-mail addresses to send an interview schedule to the editors. For the news sites that did not offer e-mail addresses, the researcher sent the interview schedule via the 'contact us' feedback facility. The interview schedule was in the form of a self completion questionnaire with open-ended questions as described in chapter three. It was designed to determine the attitudes and views of editors towards interactivity.

The researcher sent out the self-completion interview schedules during the course of the visits to the net. Where an e-mail link to the editor was provided, this was

preferred as a means to get in touch with the editor via the general feedback form provided on the site. This was done to ensure that the interview schedule was sent to all the websites in the sample studied. Responses from the editors were necessarily expected during the two week period of the researcher's visits to the net, but a waiting period of one week was set by the researcher. If no response was received, the researcher would e-mail again. The process was repeated over two months before the March elections. After this, no response was perceived by the researcher as unwillingness to participate on the part of the online editors.

The open ended interview research procedure, although hampered by a low response rate, provided little but useful data that the researcher used to help answer questions set at the beginning. This low response rate was not uncharacteristic of this approach, as noted earlier on by Deacon *et al* (1999: 67) that "the absence of personal contact limits the opportunities to persuade people to participate, and for this reason self-completion questionnaire surveys generally attract lower response rates". Despite several attempts to get the editors to respond to the questions in the interview schedule, only five out the 22 e-mailed questionnaires yielded responses. Even among those that responded, digression was quite evident. The researcher dealt with the editors' digression as an "inductive process (that) can be enormously valuable, particularly when investigating complex and uncharted areas" (Deacon *et al*, 1999: 69). The information from the responses of the editors was used to make inferences about interactivity and online journalism. However, it is also noteworthy at this point, that it was impossible to make generalizations about the Zimbabwean online media given the low response rates.

4.3.1 Questions on the Public Sphere

The researcher structured questions to solicit answers on the views of the editors about the type of public domain they present on their websites. Despite very low response rates from this research approach, the researcher established that a turn to online journalism was a result of the attractiveness of boundless opportunities offered by Internet search engines. One of the editors, who was the sole sponsor of the site, acknowledged that a decision to go online was prompted by an in-service course in web-based journalism. The editor admits that by a sheer coincidence, she came across an Internet search engine and she decided to experiment on this ‘open source content management system that requires the users just to read and learn to do things using forums of Joomla’. Reading from this response, then, it can be inferred that the main attraction to Web-based journalism lies in the quest for a new and different public sphere.

A further enquiry into the interactive potentials that can be accessed using such an Internet facility revealed that content can be published on the World Wide Web using features such as page caching to improve performance, printable versions of pages, news flashes, blogs, polls, website searching, and language internationalization (Rainie and Horrigan, 2005). This again shows that Internet-based journalism has the ability to create and shape a new public sphere which could enrich the Habermasian notion.

The question of the public sphere was also tackled, based on the editors’ responses to the target readership of their news site. Editors who responded to the interview survey believe that they target general news readers, political activists, policy

makers at an international level, business persons and even potential investors in Zimbabwe. The Zimbabwean online media, then, can be said to present an all-encompassing and dynamic public domain which can unite users across a whole spectrum of social strata.

This brought the interview questionnaire to the question of accessibility. Editors hoped Zimbabweans access these websites through the few remaining institutions and organisations to which they belong. The editor of *Change Zimbabwe* answered “The hope is that they are getting access in Internet cafes and through the organizations they belong to which may give them access to the Internet. Otherwise there is really nothing else I can do.” For some news sites that offer print versions like *The Zimbabwean*, accessibility without any room for interactivity can be improved, as the editor explains: “we print and distribute 5000 a week in UK, 10,000 in SA and 40,000 in Zimbabwe (but of course up to 20 people read each copy in SA and Zimbabwe)”. The question of accessibility through the Internet, therefore, remains a factor beyond the control of the editors or even web-designers.

4.3.2 Questions of Interactivity

The level of interactivity that these sites can accord can be easily measured by visiting each website and viewing what it offers. However, editors who responded to the interview schedule merely alluded to the vast potential of interactivity that has remained untapped. For instance, the editor of *Change Zimbabwe* comments:

According to literature, I should be able to offer letters which readers can put straight onto the pages, with a facility for me to review it before it goes on. I should be able to allow my correspondents to put their stories onto the pages –

again with the same to review and allow. But it needs a bit of research. You just have to research for yourself how to do things. So I became content as soon as I managed to upload my stories and pictures and have not been able to develop any other tools.

The editor then went on to name the limited interactive options that the news sites offered such as letters that are sent via the “contact us” tab. What seems to take priority here is the need to get the story to the reader over the need to empower the users with interactive devices. One editor was also honest enough to admit lack of know-how on how to upload a variety of interactive devices. Similarly, the editor of the *Zimbabwean* commented “we're really frantically busy at the moment ... we desperately need help. We don't have any interactive or feedback options because we don't have anybody to monitor them. Which is a pity.”

Responding to the question on the types of interactive options the site offers, the editor of *SW Radio Africa* stated:

Well, you have found the feedback form and this is the main feedback tool we have. We used to have polls and a forum but this tended to get abused by both racist Rhodesians and pro-Mugabe hot-heads, and it was taking too much time weeding out the rubbish from the genuine comments, so they got scrapped.

Interestingly, both editors place high value on the role of interactivity. They are both convinced that their sites have not yet realized the full potential that interactivity can offer. However, lack of know-how and manpower seem to be the major hindrances to the development of interactivity on the online media.

4.3.3 Questions of Cyber Democracy

The researcher asked questions about the contributions of the Zimbabwean online media to democratic debating among users. One of the major crises facing Zimbabwe today is the incapacity of civic groups to engage critically with the state and respond to the injustices and problems faced by ordinary people. Debates by independent civic groups are never given a platform under the current repressive laws in Zimbabwe. Laws such as the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA), the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) and the Broadcasting Services Act are all used successfully by ZANU PF to stifle an independent media and any civic operations (Guma, 2008). The researcher then put questions to the editors of the online newspapers on how they are dealing with the current impasse that has characterized the Zimbabwean mainstream media. Questions were asked on:

- The contributions the sites are making to democratic debating among (Zimbabwean) citizens
- The kind of issues that the users debate, if there are any
- The contributions of the sites in preparing users for the March 2008 elections
- The positive impacts of the sites towards the democratization of Zimbabwe, if any
- How the sites provide space for users to engage in public issues

All respondents agreed that the websites are contributing greatly to the promotion of free expression and eventually to the democratization process. Their responses, compiled and summarized, included:

- “Allows opinions and articles that would never see the light of print in the national newspapers or ZBC to be published and known.”
- “(Allows users to debate over) rival political agendas, the right way for change and

unity”

- “(the sites carry) many articles on legislation, electoral issues. Just search ‘electoral’, ‘elections’, or ‘watch’ using search function on the home page.”
- “(the sites contain information about) candidate profiles, issues, search ring, announcements of meetings, parliamentary debates, etc”

Explicit in the editor’ responses were reaction to an intolerant media atmosphere and an urgent need to create space for independent voices and diverse ideas. Seeing that some articles and news stories were rejected in the mainstream media and would be kept hidden from the public, the editors set up websites to overcome this selective reporting that characterizes the Zimbabwean media.

Apart from overcoming some of the problems associated with selective reporting in traditional media in Zimbabwe, the online media also offers readers an opportunity to discuss political issues, something that would never happen under the current laws that govern mainstream media. Users are given a platform to discuss political agendas and the right way to change, as the editors point out. Information on political candidates, in the form of profiles, parliamentary debates, legislation and electoral issues, were relayed to the users through the websites.

Questions were asked on how much political information was directed to the editors to determine the contributions of their websites towards a level public domain that transcends political affiliations. The editors who responded to the interview questions were from independent news websites. None of the editors from government-controlled newspapers responded to the interview questionnaire, hence their opinions did not

shape the outcome of the qualitative research component of this study. Their responses could have enriched this study's quest to determine the development of cyber democracy through a special consideration of both sides that is the state-controlled and the independent newspaper sides. There is indeed a clear distinction between independent newspapers and the state-controlled ones. The distinction is also glaring in the websites that were created from these two wings. It was very difficult to get in touch with editors of the state-controlled news websites while on the independent news websites, names and contact details of the editors were readily available.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH RESULTS

5.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 presented a compilation and an explanation of the results of this study. The content analysis gathered valuable data on various interactive options on Zimbabwean online newspapers which bring significant insights into the subject of interactivity. The qualitative research procedure also supplemented the content analysis so as to provide a basis for the discussion in this chapter. This chapter will discuss the findings of the study as they are presented in previous chapters by situating them in the context of theories discussed in chapter two. The discussion will include an interpretation of the results as well as a comparison with and contrast to other related studies referred to elsewhere in this study.

5.2 Using Shultz' Index of Analysis

An index of analysis constructed by Shultz (1999) was used to analyze the interactive options offered on Zimbabwe's online newspapers as presented in Table 5.1. The index enables one to attach numerical value to a website's interactivity level. The index has pre-assigned values for each interactive option. According to Shultz (1999) the values were assigned based on an interactive tool's sophistication and significance for interactive communication. The actual use of an interactive option does not necessarily have to be examined; it is, therefore, theoretically appropriate to weight certain tools like discussion forums more heavily than others, for instance quick polls. This was done simply because discussion forums enable further discursive efforts where as quick polls only allow limited communication functions.

Table 5.1: Analysing Interactive Feature on Zimbabwe's Online Newspapers

Interactive Feature	Points for one website	Points for 22 websites
General e-mail address(es) to contact newsroom	1 pt	9 pts
List of at least some editors'/writers' e-mail (limited) or: List of editors'/writers' e-mail addresses (general pattern)	1 pt 2 pts	7 pts 4 pts
E-mail links to at least some articles' authors (limited) or: E-mail links to articles authors (general pattern)	1 pt 2 pts	2 pts 0 pt
E-mail links to politicians/officials	1 pt	1 pt
Discussion forum(s) or: Discussion forum(s) obviously hosted/journalists participate	2 pts 3 pts	12 pts 6 pts
Chat room(s) provided or: Chat room(s) obviously hosted/journalists participate	1 pt 3 pts	2 pts 3 pts
Quick poll/user survey or: Sophisticated poll/survey (open questions/linked to forum/background info)	1 pt 3pts	1 pt 0pt
Letters to the editor displayed online	1 pt	7 pts
SCORE	22 pts	54 pts
MAXIMUM (MINIMUM)	22 pts 0 pts	484 pts 0 pts

Using this classification criterion, Schultz (1999), then constructed an index with points for each interactive option. The index has a scale ranging from a minimum of 0 (if a newspaper offered none of the options) to a maximum of 22 points.

Schultz's index of analysis was constructed to determine the level of interactivity on one website. Slightly different in this study, the index was applied to 22 news websites. The maximum attainable points were then calculated by multiplying the total for one website as proposed by the total number of the investigated websites. For the 22 news websites explored in this study the maximum attainable points was 484 (arrived at by multiplying

the number of websites studied and the maximum points that each website could have scored). For the online newspapers to score high on this scale, they had to offer a number of sophisticated interactive options. Analysis using this index did not include unexpected interactive options. Only the interactive options that tallied with those on the index were analyzed using this criterion.

The results show that interactivity is still very low in 22 of Zimbabwe's online newspapers. The 22 newspapers scored 57 points (12%) out of a total of 484 points according to Shultz's (1999) index of analysis. There are a number of factors that could have caused this, one of them being that newspapers are offering options of low interactive value according to this index. It was established earlier in this study that almost all the newspaper sites had an e-mail link to the newsroom. According to this index, e-mail links are classified and assigned a numerical value based on the interactive communication they can facilitate. Therefore, it can be deduced that newspapers are offering e-mail facilities of a limited interactive communication level. For instance, general e-mail facilities to contact newsrooms were most popular, yet they were mainly used for one-way upward communication and are of low rating on the index.

The other reason that could explain the low score of newspapers on this index of analysis is the averaging effect when the 22 news sites' interactive options were combined and analyzed. The average does not normally give a good representation of the variations in specific sites, in terms of the interactive options they offer. All the interactive options from different newspaper sites were combined and the index of analysis was applied. This posed a problem because the sites with limited or no options dropped the score down but the rating was high because of the size of the sample. The index was also applied to all

newspapers regardless of whether they offer print versions or not, or are independent or state-controlled. It was not in the interest of this study to establish the origins or affiliations of the newspaper sites. The major focus was on establishing interactivity levels on Zimbabwe's online newspapers. A newspaper only had to be accessible online, for it to be considered for this study.

Applying Schultz's (1999) index of analysis reveals that interactivity is still very low on Zimbabwe's online newspapers. The reason of low interactivity can be attributed to ownership and control of media outlets. Given the Zimbabwean climate of media repression, people could have been too intimidated to participate more so when they had no knowledge on who owns the websites. Another reason for low interactivity on the overall websites could be that the pro-Mugabe sites offered no or superficial interactive options that added little value when evaluated using Schultz's index of analysis.

5.3 The Role of Interactivity

The study adopted Heeter's (1989) dimensions of interactivity to analyze the findings because they are specific and measurable (Kenny, *et al*, 2000). Heeter's dimensions do not directly match the features explored in this study. However, there are useful areas of overlap between the focus of this study and Heeter's dimensions of interactivity. The primary goal of this study was to identify interactive features on Zimbabwe's online newspapers and to apply assessment tools in relation to how they improve political communication. The online media play a critical role in the Zimbabwean context of stiff media repression (Chuma, 2004). Heeter's dimensions of responsiveness to the user, facilitation of interpersonal communication and ease of adding information were used to assess interactivity on the newspaper sites.

The findings of this study reveal that Zimbabwe's online newspapers offer interactive tools that facilitate responsiveness to users. Almost all the newspapers in the sample offered an e-mail address to contact the newsroom. These e-mail addresses, if used effectively, can convey users' complaints to the editors. The editors can in turn respond to the queries within a short period of time. However, from the experiences of the researcher with trying to solicit a response from the editors using the e-mail facility, a paltry five out of the 22 newspapers contacted replied. Several efforts thereafter to solicit responses from the remaining 17 news sites were fruitless. The nature of the query could have given rise to the low response, but there is no better cause to contact a newspaper site other than for the purposes of research, especially considering how it can bring about recommendations for improvement in the delivery system. While facilities for responsiveness for the user may be there, their actual use and the willingness of online newspapers to respond to queries is still questionable.

Interactivity can also be measured by how much effort users must exert (Heeter, in Kenny *et al*, 2000). This dimension assesses interactivity according to how much effort users must put in to get what they want to read. On some websites users exert no effort beyond reading the text information which the online newspaper "pushes" to them, while on others users select each "page" or screen to view, sending a message to the central computer asking it to display the requested page (Kenny *et al*, 2000). Executives of online newspapers do not agree as to which extreme presents a desirable measure of interactivity (Kenny *et al*, 2000). This study regards the latter as a better indication of interactivity because users are given an opportunity to fiddle with the computer and select the precise information that they want to read. The former creates a passive reader who is merely there

to accept what the website offers. The content analysis in this study revealed that users are given websites with homepages. The only choice that is accorded to users is on the different interactive options that each site offers which enable users to click and visit what they wish to online, be it chatrooms, blogs or e-mail links on the 'contact us' section. All the options that a website offered were displayed on the homepage. Users have no choice except to work within the confines of what the online newspaper offers them. This cannot be compared to empowering of the users because they are not really in control. Therefore, in terms of this dimension Zimbabwean online newspapers fall short of the interactivity levels of exerting more effort for one to get the precise information one wants. With the Zimbabwean online newspapers, one can exert more effort, but there is always a limit to what one can do.

An assessment of interactivity using the ease of adding information criterion lends into questioning whether the online newspapers offer features that enable users to add information to already circulating articles and pass them on to other readers. Interactive features like chat rooms, discussion forums, blogs, and sophisticated surveys, the kinds of which have open questions that solicit the readers' opinions, are necessary if ease of adding information is to be achieved. Apart from enabling ease of adding information, these interactive features facilitate reactive or interactive communication as well (Choi, 2004). According to Shultz's (1999) index of analysis, these interactive features were accorded the highest number of points based on the level of interactive engagement and empowerment they can afford the user. The findings of this study reveal that these particular interactive features were offered, but on very few online newspapers, for instance only one newspaper site out of the 22 newspapers explored offered features that offered open-ended questions. This alone limits accessibility and use of interactive tools by

Internet news consumers of Zimbabwean online newspapers. As a result, it is highly unlikely for interactive communication to take place on these online newspapers.

Interactive features which facilitate interpersonal communication were also identified on the explored online sites. Scholars who have studied interpersonal communication have failed to agree on a specific definition of the term (Knapp and Dally, 2002). What scholars seem to agree on is that at least two communicators are involved in “message exchange for meaning making” (Knapp and Dally, 2002: 9). Under Heeter’s (1989) facilitation of interpersonal communication dimension, interactive features like e-mail links, discussion forums and live chats, were hailed for promoting this type of communication. The content analysis in this study identified all these interactive features in the explored 22 Zimbabwean online newspapers. The content analysis revealed that all online newspapers offered at least an e-mail link to contact the newsrooms. This supports Shultz’ (1999) findings that the wide use of e-mail facilities as feedback tools shows that newspapers have not totally ignored the Internet’s conversational potential.

The presences of e-mail links, discussion forums and live chats then facilitate message exchange in interpersonal communication. The fact that users can interact among themselves and with editors and get responses promptly, using these interactive features, simulates the physical social situations previously believed to be interpersonal communication environments. However, it was not within the scope of this study to determine the actual use of these interactive features to promote interpersonal communication. The main focus was on assessing the online newspapers’ potentials to initiate interpersonal communication which would in turn promote interactivity and subsequently cyberdemocracy. Having established the potential for interpersonal

communication in the online newspapers, the other levels were then explored in this study.

Interpersonal communication on these online newspapers is of critical importance to the Zimbabwean citizenry because the traditional media has failed to live up to its promise of according people the right to free expression and access to information (Tomaselli and Dunn, 2001). Interpersonal communication is even provided for in the Zimbabwean constitution which allows every citizen to “receive and impart” ideas and information (Lush and Kupe, 2005). Therefore, if the traditional media is not providing for this constitutionally bound right of citizens, it becomes apparent that some other venues need to be explored. The online newspapers’ role in facilitating interpersonal communication becomes vital in this respect.

Heeter’s (1989) dimensions of interactivity present useful analytical tools to explicate the complex issue of interactivity. He links interactive tools to the forms of communication they each facilitate. The other dimensions were not applicable to this study because they measure interactivity using features which it did not identify in this study. Heeter’s (1989) dimensions are more applicable to studies which focus and intensely explore one particular website, and where the searches for interactive tools go deeper into the opening of the individual articles. Dimensions like complexity of choice available were not applicable to this study as they focus on interactive features that can only be identified when one opens the actual articles. Heeter’s (1989) dimensions can be used to assess a broad spectrum of interactive tools and analyze the interactivity forms that they facilitate. An analysis of interactive features using these dimensions does not necessarily entail the actual use of the interactive tools by readers.

Furthermore, McMillan and Hwang (2002) put forward a three-dimensional model for an analysis of interactivity levels. The three dimensions, which are two way communication, control navigation/control choices and time to load/time, as discussed earlier in this study, can be used to assess how interactive a newspaper site is. According to McMillan and Hwang (2002), two-way communication alone, as a dimension, is not a complete measure of interactivity. Subsequently, Choi (2004) identifies the interactive features that enable two-way communication as Internet polls, question and answer section E-mail to friends/readers. The scholars here seem to agree as to the limitations of the interactive features to two way communication only. These dimensions can be used to measure interactivity on websites. However, McMillan and Hwang (2002) do not view these interactive features as merely limited to two way communication only, suggesting that the type of communication they facilitate further overlap with other dimensions to enable interactive communication, (see Fig 1).

Choi (2004) further classifies online discussion boards, chat room, e-mail to friends initiated by forums and Blogs as interactive features that facilitate reactive/Interactive and communication. However, the dimensions of interactivity put forward by McMillan and Hwang (2002) classify all interactive features under control navigation/control choices. According to McMillan and Hwang (2002), all interactive features have the potential to facilitate two-way communication and interactive communication, but the differentiating factor is the user's perceptions. Following this line of thinking, perceptions of users play a critical role for interactivity to be achieved. Provision of interactive tools, therefore, becomes a mere step into the realization of interactivity. Contrarily, Choi (2004) views offering interactive features on a news website as interactivity itself. The content analysis of Zimbabwe's online newspapers in this study identified all the interactive features as put

forward earlier by Choi (2004). This is largely disputed by McMillan and Hwang (2002), who view interactivity as a communication aspect that lies at the intersection of control navigations/interactive features and two-way communication. At this intersection, they say, there will either be active or passive participation by the user. These two parallel views of interactivity confirm the lack of clarity that surrounds the concept.

This study was slightly different from McMillan and Hwang's (2002) in that it did not measure the actual use of the interactive tools. However, their key dimensions provided this study with valuable insight into the assessment of interactivity which does not merely end at identification of interactive tools. This study was more in line with Choi's (2004) study in its view of interactivity as the ability to connect readers to editors and readers to other readers, using a chain of interactive tools. Interactive tools that connect readers to other readers and readers to editors were identified. The only limiting factor to interactivity on Zimbabwe's online newspapers is that interactive features are not readily available on all the websites. Some websites offered only one option while others offered a number of options, but still of limited interactivity potential.

5.4 Cyberdemocracy in Zimbabwe's Online Newspapers

According to Ferber *et al* (2007) websites have the potential to offer citizens an audience of active and engaged users interested in political discourse. Therefore, cyber-interactivity models should make provision for not just two-way communication but three-way communication, as well as providing mechanisms for public deliberation. Zimbabwe's online newspapers were also explored to assess their roles in promoting cyberdemocracy and providing a space for public deliberations in political discourses. The role of the online newspapers in the aspect of public deliberation was analyzed on a two-fold basis. First the

study sought to establish cyberdemocracy during the run-up to the March 2008 elections and then move on to determine the online public sphere.

The results of the content analysis revealed that interactive features were used to capture the atmosphere and mood of the time. For instance, on the home page of one of the sites explored was displayed an online poll representing the aspiring presidential candidates. Active participation took place when users expressed their opinions on who they predicted was likely to win the presidential elections. Opinion polls of this nature promote cyberdemocracy in two ways. Firstly, they give an opportunity for the participant to influence other users when he or she casts a vote for a preferred candidate. Secondly, when the user submitted his or her vote the overall results for the poll were displayed. The same user would then situate his or her opinion in the context of what the majority of people are thinking. The resultant level of communication was two-way communication.

Apart from aiding a bilateral flow of messages in the form of two-way communication (Choi, 2004), Internet polls can also ignite and channel discussions and become part of a communicative level that can reach interactive level (Schultz, 1999). For instance, in the cited example of the Internet poll on one of Zimbabwe's online newspapers, users would discuss the results of the poll survey itself or the suitability of the candidates. Even though this was not ascertained in this study, the potential for poll surveys culminating in discussions cannot be ruled out. Despite the fact that the interactive level of communication due to polls was not ascertained, this interactive device can still be hailed for engaging users in political discourses of the time.

However, Internet polls have their own limitations in terms of promoting cyberdemocracy.

The most glaring limitation is in the fact that only two of the 22 Zimbabwe's online newspapers offered poll surveys. This would affect accessibility by users, hence low cyber interactivity. Only quick poll surveys were conducted and the only other sophisticated survey, with an open-ended question, was not user friendly, as discussed elsewhere in this study. Quick poll surveys have inherent weaknesses in terms of facilitating cyber interactivity. According to Shultz (1999), Internet polls and surveys restrict users to operate merely on a reactive level of communication; they do not offer users an opportunity to engage in further discursive constructs that inform interactive communication.

Six out of the 22 of Zimbabwe's online newspapers used blogs to promote cyberdemocracy. As highlighted in the previous chapter, blogs are used to present candid information, the likes of which would never be printed in state-controlled newspapers. Blogs on one of the news sites could be accessed under an umbrella heading, "Kick Mugabe Out". One did not even have to read through the texts posted on this interactive device to know the type of information presented. This was clearly protest writing, given the political situation in Zimbabwe. According to Rosenberry (2005), citizen blogs, online letters and online polls are features that show that a newspaper website is empowering users with a channel to voice their opinions (putting institutional authority behind citizen voices). In the Zimbabwean context, the institutional authority could be the state and its media laws. If readers are empowered to write information that forms their opinions, in the traditional media this being regarded as contravening the media laws, then that would be true empowerment. According to the media laws such as POSA and AIPPA, it is a criminal offence to write and publish information that is negative about Mugabe (Lush and Kupe, 2005). With these laws still in place, it is quite clear the texts posted on these blogs would

never be published in the traditional state-owned Zimbabwean media.

Following one of the bloggers' welcome statement to his blog, inferences can be made about perceptions of the user in terms of how he views the medium and its role. The blogger first introduces himself with "the opinions of a blogger, writer, singer, son, brother, father and husband". He goes on explicitly to distance himself from professional journalism and asserts himself as a true citizen journalist. Above all, he states his role of making the people aware of the political situation in Zimbabwe. Using McMillan and Hwang's (2002) Measures of Perceived Interactivity (MPI) model, the motives for setting up blogs on Zimbabwe's online newspapers can be inferred. The model attributes user perceptions or experiences of users as the main reason why participants engage with the media interactively. With this particular blogger, perceptions that prompted him to use this interactive device could be the potential of the Internet to reach out to an innumerable number of readers across geographical boundaries, what McMillan and Hwang (2002) termed synchronous communication on the MPI model. The blogger is very clear about his intention, which is to let as many people as possible know of the devastating rule in Zimbabwe. His perceptions of blogs and the Internet as a medium, therefore, have informed his choice of the best channel to create this awareness.

McMillan and Hwang's (2002) Measures of Perceived Interactivity model also focuses on the experiences of users as the drive to indulge in interactivity. Applying this aspect of the model to Zimbabwe's online media, then, two types of experience are noticeable. It could be experience with the online media, Internet proficiency or physical experience with the political situation, first hand experience with the devastating rule. Both these experiences are apparent with the blogger. Scanning through the blogger's profile displayed on the

page showed that he is a Zimbabwean who only left the country in 2000. This indicates that he is likely to have experienced the crises due to the current political situation. The fact that he is able to combine the two-way communication (to read and send messages) and control navigation/control choices (use an interactive device) to participate actively, show his Internet experience as explicated in McMillan and Hwang's (2002) MPI model. The two types of experience could have acted in combination to urge the blogger to engage interactively on one of Zimbabwe's online newspapers.

Apart from McMillan and Hwang's (2002) MPI model, Ferber *et al* (2007) propose a six-part model to analyze cyberdemocracy on newspaper websites. The six-part model, as explained in the previous chapter, adds to McMillan's (2002) four-part model. The six-part model was purposively chosen because of its improvement on the four-part model, hence offering a comprehensive set of dimensions for the analysis and discussion of interactive devices and their role in cyberdemocracy. According to both models, the provision of information on websites is a monologue, mainly because readers have no control over what they find on the site.

Both the four-part and six-part models classify feedback as one-way communication with limited participation. The findings of the content analysis in this study reveal that Zimbabwean online newspapers solicit feedback from their readers using the e-mail facility. According to the two models, communication of this nature restricts users to operate on a one-way communication basis. The e-mail device had the highest frequency - 49% in relation to all the other interactive tools - yet it accords users minimal interactivity. There is usually no assurance that the solicited feedback will generate any response (Ferber *et al*, 2007). In relation to this study, what this means, therefore, is that even if the bulk of

Zimbabwe's online newspapers are connecting readers to online editors, readers to other readers, readers to politicians and officials through the e-mail device, cyber-interactivity will remain low because of the inherent limitations of the feature to promote interactivity and/or cyberdemocracy.

McMillan's (2002) and Ferber *et al* (2007) models also agree on how websites provide an opportunity for responsive dialogue which paves the way for two-way communication. In this category of communication, the sender still retains the primary control of the process (McMillan, 2002). In the online newspapers explored in this study, the sender in the form of the online newspapers' staff, load the information on the website and decide on what interactive options to provide on the site. The interactive options that enable responsive dialogue are similar to those that allow two-way communication, devices such as Internet polls and e-mail to friends. The role of the reader is pre-determined by the online newspapers' staff. The reader is merely expected to read the texts, and use available interactive tools to send feedback. The major weakness of this type of communication is that it does not empower the reader. Again this adds to the criticism of low availability and low Internet accessibility that affect Zimbabwean online newspapers, apart from the issue of the inherent limitations of the device itself.

The fourth dimension in the direction of communication as proposed in the two models is mutual discourse. Mutual discourse gives both parties an equal opportunity to send and receive messages. The provision of interactive tools such as chat rooms and discussion forums signifies the occurrence of mutual discourse (Ferber *et al*, 2007). Chat rooms and discussion forums were offered on only two of the 22 online newspapers explored. There is such an anomaly in terms of the interactive devices that are given prominence in

Zimbabwe's online newspapers and their corresponding significance in promoting interactivity and cyberdemocracy. The online newspapers are focusing on providing interactive devices that are of low value to interactivity or that offer the user limited interactive communication. If online newspapers were really for the empowerment of the users, great emphasis would be given to devices that promote the highest level of interactivity. If prominence was given to devices like that of high interactive level chat rooms and discussion forums, these could have been more common on the websites, their value lying in facilitating mutual discourse.

Mutual discourse then leads to yet another level of communication termed public deliberation. Ferber *et al* (2007) add public discourse and controlled responses to McMillan's (2002) four-part model, to come up with the six-part model. Considering that Mcmillan's two-way communication could not account for the kind of participation that is not moderated by journalists, Ferber *et al* (2007) added public discourse and controlled response to make provisions for three-way communication. The study identified chat rooms, discussion forums and blogs as some of the devices that participants can use to deliberate on political discourse. Since users can post their opinions and get responses from other participants without necessarily having to go through a journalist, there is a possibility that an entirely free form of interaction will take place. For instance, in the discussion of the use of blogs on one of Zimbabwe's online newspapers, a blogger had his own page on the main site. There is the potential for the blogger to respond to queries from other participants with no journalist involved. The blogger had an opportunity to address an unknown third recipient of the message, hence three-way communication. This kind of interaction, as represented in the three-way direction of communication, empowers users to influence each other out of the control of journalists. The websites will then have the

potential to offer citizens an audience of engaged users interested in political discourse (Ferber *et al*, 2007).

The last three-way communication on the improved model of political communication explains controlled response in the interaction process. In controlled response, interactive devices such as polls and bulletin boards allow users to participate when they vote and submit their votes, but the site retains control over the content. In controlled forums and chat rooms, there will be a moderator or journalist who will then forward transcripts of the discussions to the site (Ferber *et al*, 2007). Site control can also take place in public discourse where some comments will be deleted for libel, obscenity and other violations (Ferber *et al*, 2007). The controlled response as the highest order instance of communication in this model, then, places greater weighting on interactive devices like online polls in promoting cyberdemocracy. Online Zimbabwean newspapers rarely use online polls to empower readers. Therefore, according to this model, these newspapers are not doing enough to promote improved political communication.

This study establishes that interactive devices were used cautiously because of the problems they pose when journalists tried to maintain site control. One of the editors lamented on how the polls and forums were abused by what he termed “racist Rhodesians and pro-Mugabe hot-heads”. The site had to withdraw these interactive features because there was no meaningful political deliberation as intended. This justifies the proposal for controlled responses to ensure that meaningful deliberation of political discourses takes place (Ferber *et al*, 2007). Similarly, Rosenberry (2005) had proposed that improved political communication in the online arena has its greatest potential only when interaction is fostered and facilitated by journalists. However, some scholars (McMillan and Hwang,

2002; Choi, 2004; Shultz, 1999) elevate free-form interactivity as the ideal for public deliberation; this study establishes how this is problematic. The comments by the editors might be indicative of a fresh look at interactivity and political communication. The previously-held view that any kind of entirely free form of interactivity is essential for democratic deliberation in cyberdemocracy as proposed by Tsagaraousianou *et al* (1997) appears to be too radical and, therefore, poses a lot of challenges as one editor points out.

The roles of Zimbabwe's online newspapers in promoting democracy, as suggested by the editors, are to publish articles that will never be considered in conventional newspapers, to provide spaces for political discussions and to publish electoral candidates' profiles. In theory, these online newspapers are living up to their role of promoting cyberdemocracy, as citizens are given an opportunity to exercise their right to free expression, a right that they are denied by the traditional newspapers. However, the promises of online media are not so easy to attain because there is a number of factors that work against the achievement of a fully fledged and thriving cyberdemocracy. One of the challenges is that the target citizens are not composed of a homogenous computer literate people (Schmidtke in Tsagaraousianou *et al*, 1998). In the face of all the crises that Zimbabwean citizens are experiencing, computer literacy would not be one's priority. Computer literacy is thus likely to remain a major threat to the success of cyberdemocracy in the Zimbabwean online media. Apart from computer illiteracy, there are also other factors like accessibility to the Internet within Zimbabwe in particular which hinders the full function of cyberdemocracy and its transformation into actual democracy to yield practical results.

5.5 The Internet as a Public Sphere

The issue of the public sphere has been quite contentious in the study of public

communication. Theorists and scholars (Hartley, 1992; Fraser, 1987; Poster, 1995) have tried to situate ideals of the Habermasian notion of the public sphere into modern media. Evident in most studies centred on the public sphere is the view that there is a need for a shift in focus from the Habermasian view of the public sphere. Hartley (1992: 1) advocates the re-conceptualization of the public sphere by suggesting that “the popular media of the modern period are the public domain, the place where and the means by which the public is created and has its being”. This means that the public sphere of modern times is no longer restricted to coffee houses, village churches and town halls as previously postulated by Habermas (1989). This study uses this revised notion to discuss the findings of the emergence of a new public sphere on Zimbabwe’s online newspapers.

According to Poster (1995), the concept of the public sphere is central to any critical appreciation of democracy. Issues of democratizing politics and the public sphere are interrelated to such an extent that discussions of the two are inseparable. Even the Habermasian public sphere was conceptualized in relation to politics and democratic deliberations of the time. In this study, responses to questions on the democratizing potential of Zimbabwe’s online newspapers revealed that editors were merely alluding to the untapped potential of the Internet to present a public sphere with infinite possibilities of political deliberations. One of the editors laments the lack of possibilities of offering facilities that readers could use to post messages straight on to the site. Another possibility is for correspondents to post their articles. None of these features is available on the site, however, due to lack of research and resources. If readers were to be empowered to post their messages in a free-form manner like this, there is the likelihood of an emergence of a new public sphere. The public sphere within Zimbabwe’s online websites is still merely operating at the level of offering potentialities. This confirms Rosenberry’s (2005)

proposition that online newspapers offer promises of avenues for greater citizen engagement.

In response to a question on the public sphere, one editor explicitly declared his intention to retain site control in the need to review articles first before uploading them onto the site. This is concurrent with Rosenberry (2005), Ferber *et al* (2007) and Bucy and Tao (2007) who emphasize controlled responses. Some scholars criticize this as some kind of restriction which does not favour the emergence of a vibrant public sphere. There exist two parallel theories about online interactivity and the public sphere. Some theorists advocate for some form of control, while others are for an entirely unrestricted online arena for a public sphere.

In support of controlled interactivity, Bucy and Tao (2007) suggest mediation and moderation in online communication networks for meaningful public deliberation. According to Bucy and Tao's (2007) mediated moderation model, mediation entails an intervening variable while moderation specifies the condition for direction of communication. They also specify that any variable can be used as a moderator. Important is the suggestion that mediated moderation is central to interactive communication. Concurrent with this study's findings, therefore, is the need for the editor as a moderator to interact with the site. The insistence of the editor to moderate interactivity on the website by reviewing what is posted on the site first before it published can be seen as merely carrying out one of his or her journalistic responsibilities. According to this theory, the editor's insistence on site control is a positive attribute of interactivity and thus of the creation of a meaningful public sphere. Since the editor's role will be to moderate, control and direct the flow of messages, it is expected that public deliberation will carry more

weight and will be different from the social networking where participants are drawn primarily by the fun of it. The moderator journalist will also ensure that discussions and interactions are relevant to the cause. As summarized by Rosenberry (2005), online papers have a part to play by virtue of the traditional role of journalists in the political communication process. When moderation takes place, then online news sites will become more suitable venues than other free-form online discourses.

At the other extreme are theorists who argue for an unrestricted form of discussions, forums and chats. Ferber *et al* (2008) highlight public discourse, where participants interact freely amongst themselves, as the one of the highest levels in their direction of communication. This level of communication, they conclude, is essential for public deliberation. Contrary to the findings of this study, the interviewed editors are of the belief that a meaningful public sphere is only created when interaction is monitored and moderated by journalists. According to one of the editors, some interactive devices had to be scrapped because of lack of human resources for gate keeping. After realizing how free-form interactivity is open to abuse, the online editors had to remove some of the site's interactive features.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

This chapter will draw conclusions based on the findings of the content analysis and the qualitative research procedures that informed this study. Conclusions will also be drawn based on the outcomes of the review of literature, analysis of results and discussions in the previous chapters. Conclusions will cover the threefold-dimension of the role of Zimbabwe's online media. Study objectives, analysis and discussion of this study covered these three aspects, which are interactivity, cyberdemocracy and the public sphere. The chapter will finally present recommendations for future research on Zimbabwe's online newspapers.

6.2 Interactivity on Zimbabwe's Online Newspapers

Interactivity has been discussed as a challenge by many scholars and theorists. Different definitions have been put forward, but none seem adequate to articulate this complex term (Mcmillan and Hwang, 2002). Sharp disagreements on the term arise when scholars choose to focus their perceptions of interactivity on various key elements the concept suggests. Key elements of interactivity that are sources of disagreement among scholars range from different directions of communication which can be achieved to a number of features that enable interactivity to take place. The conclusion that can be drawn from this broad spectrum of parallel descriptions and standpoints is that particular studies were focused on furthering a particular line of understanding.

Interactivity on Zimbabwe's online newspapers was found to be very low. The content

analysis of the 22 online newspapers reveals that interactive options were limited in terms of widespread use and presence across the websites, and in terms of the real interactivity that they were able to accord a user. The findings were similar to those of other studies by Shultz (1999), Rosenberry (2005) and Ferber *et al* (2007). The content analysis revealed that online sites were providing features that offered limited interactivity. The researcher discovered that the e-mail facility was very common with the online newspapers, yet this facility limits users to operate at a merely reactive level of interactive communication. Interactive options that offer higher levels of interactivity, like discussion forums and chat rooms, were not popular with Zimbabwe's online newspapers. An analysis of the interactive devices using Schultz's (1999) index of analysis revealed shockingly low levels of interactivity on Zimbabwe's online newspapers. Of the 484 attainable points for the interactive devices, Zimbabwean online newspapers only scored a paltry 54 points.

The findings of the qualitative research procedure reveal that editors are reluctant to offer interactive options as it would mean more work for them. Concurrent with Shultz's (1999) findings that some journalists are horrified at the idea that readers would want to engage in discussions with them, this study also revealed similar sentiments on the part of Zimbabwe's online newspaper editors. The editors revealed their preference for controlled interactivity while they remain in control of what is posted on the sites. However, according to the surveyed literature, the retaining of site control by editors was not condemned to be entirely wrong. Rosenberry (2005) concludes that there is a need for an incorporation of the values into the traditional political communication process for meaningful interactivity. Therefore, it is not entirely negative that journalists in Zimbabwe are paranoid in the face of interactivity on their websites.

The low levels of interactivity due to limited devices affected the other three facets of this study. The potential for cyberdemocracy and the creation of a new public sphere both hinged on the availability of interactive devices that enable two-way and three-way communication. An assessment of cyberdemocracy and the public sphere, therefore, was only feasible at the websites' level of potential.

6.3 The Potential for Cyberdemocracy

Previous studies reveal that websites have the potential to offer citizens a thriving form of democracy (Ferber *et al*, 2007; Rosenberry, 2005; McMillan, 2000; Choi, 2004). The online arena promotes cyberdemocracy through greater access to political information, higher levels of engagement and deliberation and even breaking down barriers of time and space (Rosenberry, 2005). The websites' potential is not questionable on this issue. The contentious issue is how this potential can be translated into real practical terms.

Zimbabwe's online newspapers were found to be promoting cyberdemocracy but the same limitations that effected low interactivity also affected this component of the study. Interactive devices that promote cyberdemocracy were identified in some of the online newspapers in the sample. Online polls were used to mirror the political realities of what was happening in Zimbabwe during the run up to the March 2008 elections. Other interactive devices closely linked to promoting cyberdemocracy identified on the sites were blogs, chat rooms and discussion forums. Transcripts of the discussions were available on a few of the newspaper sites.

In terms of cyberdemocracy, therefore, the findings of this study suggest that Zimbabwean online newspapers are asserting themselves as alternative avenues to the traditional media

for political deliberations on diverse opinions. From the editors' point of view, some of the articles that are posted on the websites would not have been subjects for public consumption in the traditional media. The Zimbabwean online newspapers are closing the spaces and boundaries between the citizens and the media created by tough media laws. The online newspapers provide political information about electoral candidates, parliamentary debates and news articles based on politics, as one of the editors pointed out. Political information on the online newspapers helps citizens to gain an insight into the candidates' profiles and helps them to make informed decisions.

However, the militating factors for promoting cyberdemocracy were assumed to be centred on Internet accessibility. Though some of the editors are of the view that people within Zimbabwe get access through the organisations they belong to or in Internet cafés, this is a minority of the population.

6.4 The New Public Sphere

According to literature surveyed in this study, it can be concluded that the Internet is the medium closest to the revival of the Habermasian public sphere because of its ability to allow equal opportunity for users to air their views. The Internet is also capable of restoring the ideals of a public sphere by giving users an option to remain anonymous. This encourages people to deliberate on public and political issues freely. This study established that the Zimbabwean online newspapers had the potential to revive political communications of diverse opinions by tapping into the Internet's vast possibilities to present a public sphere that is free from the control of the state. Zimbabwe's traditional media has become state controlled where citizens are barred from making statements that criticise the current regime and its policies. Tough media laws in Zimbabwe, as lamented

by many scholars cited in this study, ban any meaningful political deliberations. Online newspapers have, therefore, stepped in to present an alternative public sphere that is free from the snares of the current regime.

One of the characteristics of an ideal public sphere is the potential to promote dialogue (Bohman in Crossely and Roberts, 2004). However, the Internet as public sphere does not necessarily enable face-to-face communication as in the conventional meaning of a dialogue. Interactivity, as discussed in this study can be equated to dialogical communication. When users exchange views on discussion forums, send and receive messages using e-mail facilities, or use any of the interactive tools to influence each other's opinion, the result will be a dialogue. The Internet as a public sphere therefore, allows dialogical communication to take place defying the geographical rules of space and time. In conclusion, the Internet has the potential to widen the Habermasian public sphere with a far greater magnitude when factors of time and space do not hinder people from holding political debates.

6.5 Recommendations

The content analysis of this study was done on all of the sampled Zimbabwean online newspapers. Coding the unit of analysis did not include the type of the site, that is whether it was a state-controlled or an independent newspaper. The analyses of the interactive devices offered on these sites were also done for the whole sample, not for individual sites. This approach had its own merits, for instance the findings show a broader picture of interactivity, cyberdemocracy and a public sphere of the Zimbabwean newspapers. The approach provides a holistic view of these three broad aspects central to this study.

However, grouping all the Zimbabwean online newspapers like this did not cater for the differences among the individual websites and their impact on the three concepts explored in this study. The approach gave an averaged view of all websites' roles. The weakness of averages is that they do not point to each of the websites' interactivity characteristics; for instance, if an online newspaper was offering a wide range of interactive options, broadening the public sphere and ultimately promoting cyber democracy that particular newspaper's score on the index of analysis would be lowered by other newspapers that offered limited or no interactive features. The study, therefore, recommends an in depth content analysis of each of the Zimbabwean online newspapers to give a clearer picture of its impact on each of the three aspects explored in this study.

The qualitative research procedure solicited responses from online editors to answer some of the questions the researcher had. This procedure provided a lot of valuable insight into concepts of interactivity, cyber democracy and the public sphere and these concepts are critical for meaningful political deliberations. The researcher recommends that future researches should focus on an ethnographic look at Internet users themselves for an assessment of interactivity and the contribution it can make to cyber democracy. The researcher also recommends an in-depth review of how cyber democracy, interactivity and online public deliberations affect democracy on the ground in terms of changing the perceptions of the citizens and how these affect their voting patterns.

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Appendix 1: Letter to the Newspaper Editors

Culture, Communication & Media Studies,
University of KwaZulu-Natal (Pietermaritzburg Campus)
P/Bag X01
Scottsville. 3209.
Cell: 076 521 8248
e-mail: gadzikwaj@yahoo.co.uk or 206513510@ukzn.ac.za

17 March 2008

The (Online) Editor

Dear Sir/Madam

I am a Zimbabwean, student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, doing a Master of Arts in Media and Cultural Studies. I am writing to request your assistance in my thesis as I have chosen your site as an area for my data gathering. My thesis looks at interactivity and the role of online newspapers in Zimbabwe's run-up to 2008 elections. I am very much interested in the Internet and how much it has contributed to the broadening of the Zimbabwean public sphere.

I am looking for interactive options/feedback tools that your site offers. I have been visiting your site for quite some time now, listing these down. Could you please assist me with answering the attached questions?

For finer details of what I am doing, I have attached a copy of my proposal. Should you need any verification, my supervisors can be contacted as follows:

Dr Nicola Jones
Media and Cultural Studies,
University of KwaZulu-Natal
P/Bag X01
Scottsville. 3209.
+27 (0)332605957

Professor Anton van der Hoven
Media and Cultural Studies,
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P/Bag X01
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+27 (0)33 260 5304
083 233 2663

Your assistance will be greatly appreciated.

Yours Sincerely

Joanah Gadzikwa

Appendix 2: Interview Schedule

The information captured in this survey is strictly confidential and will be used by the researcher for the purposes of research in Media and Cultural Studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Participants have to answer questions voluntarily.

For further information contact: Joanah Gadzikwa, Department of Media and Cultural Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal. Cell: 076 521 8248, email; 206513510@ukzn.ac.za

RESEARCH TOPIC

Online media and democracy: A critical analysis of the role played by Zimbabwe's online English Newspapers in the run-up to the 2008 elections

Interview Questions

- 1) Please give a brief background and history of the online newspaper site?

- 2) What is your target readership?

- 3) What efforts are you making to reach out to ordinary Zimbabweans?

- 4) Who sponsors the site?

- 5) Does the site generate enough funds to sustain all its operations?

- 6) What are the interactive/ feedback tools offered by your site?

- 7) How do you view issues of interactivity and empowering the user?

- 8) What contributions does the site make to democratic debating among Zimbabwean citizens?

- 9) What sort of issues do users debate or discuss in your chat rooms, online forums?

- 10) What contributions is the site making in preparing readers for the 2008 elections?

- 11) What positive impacts is the site making towards the democratisation of Zimbabwe?

- 12) How does the site provide space for citizen interaction with public issues?

13) Does the site have a print version?

14) What are some of the challenges facing the site today?

Appendix 3: Informed Consent Form

The title of my research is:

Online media and democracy: A critical analysis of the role played by Zimbabwe's online English Newspapers in the run-up to the 2008 elections.

My research focuses on interactivity and its role in promoting democracy. I have chosen your site as an area for my data gathering. I am very much interested in the Internet and how much it has contributed to the broadening of the Zimbabwean public sphere. I am specifically focusing on interactive devices on your news site and their role during Zimbabwe's run-up to 2008 elections.

I am a Zimbabwean, student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, doing a Master of Arts in Journalism and Media Studies. I have a BA Honours Degree in Culture, Communication and Media Studies from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (PMB).

My contact details are as follows:

Cell: 076 521 8248

E-mail: gadzikwaj@yahoo.co.uk or 206513510@ukzn.ac.za

My supervisor is Dr Nicola Jones, and she can be contacted at Media and Cultural Studies Department at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Pietermaritzburg Campus)

Her contact details are as follows:

Phone: +27 (0)332605957

E-mail: jonesn1@ukzn.ac.za

I have chosen you as someone who can contribute to my understanding of interactivity issues on online journalism. I would like to have an opportunity to ask you questions pertaining to levels of interactivity on your site. As such, could you please assist me with answering an interview questionnaire.

If you agree to participate in this survey, all I will ask you do is to fill out an electronic interview schedule and e-mail it back to me.

Information gathered from this interview schedule will be used strictly for my studies and will

be kept private and confidential. Your participation will be greatly appreciated.

Declaration

I..... (Full names of participant) hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project, and I consent to participating in the research project.

I understand that I am at liberty to withdraw from the project at any time, should I so desire.

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

DATE

.....

.....

RESEARCHER

Joanah Gadzikwa

Thank you.

Appendix 4: A List of Zimbabwean Online Newspapers

AllAfrica.com - Zimbabwe

Current news from African newspapers (includes **PANA**, the Dakar based news agency created to provide an African perspective on news events). AllAfrica.com is formed from a merger of the former *Africa News* from Durham, NC.
<http://allafrica.com/zimbabwe/>

Change Zimbabwe

Current news and analysis / commentary. "changezimbabwe.com stands for a wider perspective on Zimbabwe news, in-depth analysis of the week's news, daily breaking stories and deeper discussion on the agenda for change." Events in the U.K. How the diaspora can rebuild Zimbabwe. <http://www.changezimbabwe.com>

Global NewsBank

Subscription service. Some universities subscribe. Includes selected reports from Zimbabwe radio, Agence France Presse, IPS, PANA, TV stations.
<http://infoweb.newsbank.com/>

Guardian (London) - Zimbabwe News ,<http://www.guardian.co.uk/>

Herald (Harare)

Online version (with selected articles) of the Zimbabwe Government newspaper; published by Zimbabwe Newspapers Ltd. Has articles from past issues including its *Sunday Mail*. <http://www.herald.co.zw/>

iafrica - News on Zimbabwe

Current news on Zimbabwe. Site owned by UUNET, Newlands, Western Cape, South Africa. <http://iafrica.com/news/specialreport/zimbabwe/>

Kubatana.net - Blog on Zimbabwe , <http://kubatanablogs.net/kubatana/>

Kubatana.net - Information and photographs: Rally in Highfields, Sunday March 11, 2007

Images from the **Save Zimbabwe Campaign** - Highfields meeting - March 11, 2007. See also Reuters article March 16, 2007.
<http://www.kubatana.net/html/archive/cact/070216kubsavezim.asp?sector=CACT>

Lexis-Nexis

Subscription only; some universities subscribe. Select NEWS. Full text articles from major U.K., U.S., Canadian and other world news sources (*BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, Agence France Presse, Associated Press, TV transcripts from NPR, CNN, etc.) <http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>

Manica Post (Mutare, Zimbabwe)

Site for the government-owned weekly print newspaper. Established in 1893 as the *Umtali Post*. Published by Zimbabwe Newspapers (1980) Ltd. <http://www.manicapost.com/index.aspx>

New Zimbabwe.com

Very current news. Commentary, discussion forums, cartoons, etc. Has the text of the REPORT ON THE 1980s ATROCITIES IN MATABELELAND AND THE MIDLANDS by the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe, March 1997. The Editor is Mduduzi Mathuthu. <http://www.newzimbabwe.com>

Newsnet

Current Zimbabwe news. Also sports, science, entertainment, crime, business, agriculture news. "Its major mandate is to **provide News and Current Affairs programming to radio and television** channels...." "Newsnet (Private) Limited is a subsidiary of Zimbabwe Broadcasting Holdings, a Government of Zimbabwe wholly-owned Company." Based in Harare, Zimbabwe. <http://www.newsnet.co.zw/>

Southscan - Briefing

Free current news on Zimbabwe. Articles extracted from the subscription service. http://www.southscan.gn.apc.org/briefings/scan_briefing2205.html

Sunday Mail

Government newspaper. See also *The Herald*. Pub. by Zimbabwe Newspapers Limited. <http://www.sundaymail.co.zw/index.aspx>

SW Radio Africa

"The Independent Voice of Zimbabwe" is a short-wave **liberation radio station** based in London broadcasting news on the political situation in Zimbabwe and music. Listen to past programs any time (requires soundcard, headset/speakers, Windows Media

Player). Run by Zimbabweans, operated by Gerry Jackson who once ran the first independent station in Zimbabwe which was subsequently closed down by the govt. It broadcasts on the 6145khz wavelength in the 49m band, daily 6 - 9 pm Zimbabwe time. See also a print article in *Southern Africa Report*, (Johannesburg), Vol. 20, No. 2, Jan. 11, 2002. <http://www.swradioafrica.com>

United Nations. Relief Web - Zimbabwe

Current news from the UN OCHA Integrated Regional Information Network for Southern Africa (IRIN-SA) and from the UN OCHA Integrated Regional Information Network for Central and Eastern Africa (IRIN-CEA). <http://www.reliefweb.int/>

Voice of America - News for Zimbabwe - Studio 7

Current Zimbabwe news (on politics, economics, health, society, etc.) **Listen to news** in English, Shona, and Ndebele (requires sound card, headset or speakers). Reporters include senior editor Ray Choto, formerly with the independent *Standard* (Harare). VOA is funded by the U.S. government. Based in Washington, D.C. <http://www.studio7news.com> or <http://voanews.com/english/Africa/Zimbabwe/>

Yahoo Zimbabwe News

<http://dailynews.yahoo.com/fc/World/Zimbabwe/>

Zimdaily.com

"Voice of the Voiceless." News, business, sports, health, discussion forums. "a non political, non-civic, nongovernmental, independent online newspaper that is an initiative of former Zimbabwean Professionals now based in the UK, US and Canada." Based in Chicago, Illinois. [KF] <http://www.zimdaily.com>

ZimNews

Links to Zimbabwe, South African, U.K. newspaper articles. Sections on human rights, land, politics, environment, corruption. Has special feature articles. Receive a daily e-mail newsletter. Sponsored by the Zimbabwe Democracy Trust. Based in London. <http://www.zwnews.com/>

Zim Online

Daily independent online newspaper. "The Zim News Online is published under a project that has been set up by seasoned **Zimbabwean journalists** and lawyers. We agreed on the need to create a daily **alternative media** voice on Zimbabwe to expand

the democratic space being shrunk by repressive media laws being selectively used to eliminate the independent media." Site based in Johannesburg, South Africa. <http://www.zimonline.co.za/>

Zimbabwe Free

A Yahoo discussion group "working towards freedom in Zimbabwe"; carries news reports. **One must join to read messages.** <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/zimbabwefree>

Zimbabwe Independent (Harare)

Independent weekly Zimbabwe print newspaper, has the full text of selected articles (news, sports, features, letters to the editor, classified ads). Their "Archive" has back issues from 1998 forward. Published by Zimind Publishers (Private) Limited. <http://www.thezimbabweindependent.com/>

Zimbabwe Post

Links to other news sites. From World News Network which has a chain of news web sites. Based in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates. <http://www.zimbabwepost.com/>

Zimbabwe Situation

Extensive news of current events from Zimbabwe newspapers. From Australia. <http://www.zimbabwesituation.com/>

Zimbabwe Times

Current political news. The Managing Editor is Geoffrey Nyarota. "Geoffrey Nyarota is an award-winning investigative journalist, newspaper editor, and media entrepreneur,...." [He] "launched Zimbabwe's leading independent daily newspaper, the *Daily News* in 1999." Source: <http://www.un.org/events/pressday/2006/nyarota.html> The *Zimbabwe Times* is based in Massachusetts. <http://thezimbabwetimes.com/>

Zimbabwean

Online and print weekly newspaper for Zimbabweans in the diaspora. Launched February 11, 2005. Published in the UK by Wilf & Trish Mbanga with a Southern African edition produced in Johannesburg." <http://www.thezimbabwean.co.uk>

Zimtownship

Current Zimbabwe news. Dating. Nitelife, Events. "aggregates and indexes content from many Zimbabwe and African news organizations" For the Zimbabwe Diaspora. Not related to the UK site at <http://zimtownship.co.uk/> Based in Massachusetts. <http://www.zimtownship.com>

ZWNNews

Current news. Free subscription to a daily e-newsletter. Links to other news sources and web sites. <http://www.zwnnews.com/>

Land Dispute

Adams, Martin - Land Reform: New Seeds On Old Ground?

London: Overseas Development Institute, 1995. 9 pp. (Natural Resource Perspective, No. 6, 1995). <http://www.odi.org.uk/nrp/nrp6.html>

BBC - Zimbabwe News

Extensive articles, background reports, maps, audio clips.
http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/in_depth/africa/2000/zimbabwe/

Guardian (London)

<http://www.guardianunlimited.co.uk/zimbabwe/>

Thompson, Carol - "Zimbabwe: Intersection of Human Rights, Land Reform, and Regional Security"

Full text article from *Foreign Policy In Focus*. Published by Interhemispheric Resource Center, Albuquerque, NM. Carol Thompson is a specialist on Southern Africa and a professor of political economy at Northern Arizona University.
<http://www.foreignpolicy-infocus.org/commentary/zimbabwe.html>