The Role of Radio and Mobile Phones in Conflict Situations

The Case of the 2008 Zimbabwe Elections and Xenophobic Attacks in Cape Town

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This article considers the role that radio and new information and communication technologies (ICTs), in particular mobile phones, played in the lives of citizens caught up in violent conflicts in Zimbabwe and South Africa in 2008. With reference to the violence-prone general elections in Zimbabwe (March- June 2008) and the xenophobic attacks in South Africa (May-July 2008) – both of which led to the loss of life – this paper explores the ways in which citizens appropriated the media to receive and generate information so necessary in the context of life-threatening conflicts and also how radio in particular appropriated new media to enhance its coverage of the conflicts. The research was informed primarily by the need to get a closer understanding of the role of radio and mobiles in the experiences of ordinary citizens and, further, the need to explore the ways in which 'new' media is being appropriated by the 'old' media to enhance both news-making and participatory cultures among audiences. The article, which is based primarily on extensive interviews, and document and content analysis, argues that, in both cases under study, mobile phones were the most critical sources of information for victims of violence, while community radio seems to have become marginal in the lives of citizens, especially in South Africa, who relied more on national radio and television, in addition to the mobiles. The appropriation of new information technologies by radio stations in both contexts was, in these circumstances, fairly substantial, especially in Zimbabwe where 'pirate' radio journalists in Zimbabwe applied 'guerrilla-style' tactics to generate and file copy in a hostile political context.
Keywords: Radio, ICT, Zimbabwe, Cape Town, conflict, xenophobia

Background to the study

Between March and June 2008, two violent events that are the focus of this paper unfolded in Zimbabwe and South Africa, both resulting in loss of life and forcing mass displacement. The first was the March 2008 'harmonised' general election in Zimbabwe, which was preceded by profound levels of violence, most of which was state-orchestrated as the ruling Zanu-PF party struggled to retain its hold on power. The March election did not produce an outright winner for president, prompting a run-off in June that same year, during which the violence escalated further. According to Human Rights Watch (2012), nearly 200 people were killed in the violence, while 36,000 were displaced.[3] The second violent event happened in South Africa, where black South Africans targeted foreign Africans living in the country, in a wave of both sporadic and highly coordinated attacks that lasted just over a month. The attacks claimed the lives of 62 people and displaced an estimated 35,000 (*Mail & Guardian*, 31 May 2008).[4]

In both cases, the violence was both lived and mediated. Within the broader public spheres in both countries, the televised, often harrowing images of violent death and destruction made for hotly contested readings and interpretations. However, within the private spheres of ordinary citizens caught up in the violence, the appropriation of the media was tied to the need to survive (or the compulsion to inflict pain on the 'other', in the case of the perpetrators).

Radio and new information and communication technologies (ICTs) – especially mobile phones – are by far the most pervasive media available to most Africans today. Although the area of radio and ICTs for development in Africa has attracted a growing body of research (see DeBruijn, Nyamnjoh, and Brinkman, 2009; Bosch,

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3   See: http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/03/08/zimbabwe-‐no-‐justice-‐rampant-‐killings-‐torture. Accessed 23 July 2012.

4   See: "Toll from xenophobic attacks rises." http://www.mg.co.za/article/2008-05-31-toll-from-xenophobic-attacks-rises). Accessed 10 September 2013.

2011; Gunner, Ligaga and Moyo, 2012), there has not been adequate research attention on the uses of radio and ICTs in conflict situations, or the appropriation of the convergence capabilities of new media to enhance reporting by traditional media such as radio. This makes the present case studies on Zimbabwe and South Africa all the more interesting.

Scope and Objectives of the Research

The main focus of the research was to explore how victims of repression and violence appropriated radio and new media in conflict situations, as well as how radio stations themselves appropriated new media for purposes of enhancing their coverage of life-threatening situations in the two countries. With regard to individuals, a purposive sampling procedure was used in both cases to identify the interviewees, who were subjected to in-depth interviews. Six radio stations were initially selected for research, and these included Cape Town-based community radio stations (Bush Radio, Radio Tygerberg and Radio Zibonele), as well as three 'pirate' radio stations that broadcast into Zimbabwe via shortwave and the Internet. These included Radio Voice of the People (VOP; based in South Africa), SW Radio (based in the UK) and Voice of America (VOA, Studio Seven; based in Washington). During the research process, however, Radio Zibonele could not be included because management representatives at the station were not available to be interviewed.

The study sought to, *inter alia*, explore the uses of ICTs by the selected radio stations and the different ways in which men and women access and participate in the use of these technologies, within the communities under study. The research also sought to establish the linkages, if any, between the use of radio and mobiles.

The general objective was therefore to begin to explore the roles that both old and new media play in changing African communities, especially in the ways in which citizens negotiate their day-to-day

struggles, and particularly in conflict situations. Beyond the comparative analysis of the case studies, the overarching aim was ultimately to contribute to the body of knowledge on how radio and ICTs could be used in disaster mitigation and conflict resolution in the African context.

With regard to radio stations, the study sought to elicit information on how they framed the 2008 conflicts in both cases, whether and the extent to which they appropriated ICTs (such as the Internet, social media platforms and mobile phones) to enhance their reporting of the conflict, and also to document the lessons learnt from the experience of covering the two events. The interviews with ordinary citizens in both Zimbabwe and South Africa were aimed at establishing the roles that the mobile phone in particular and ICTs in general played in their lives during the conflicts, and the role of community and 'pirate' radio as their sources of information during that period. The study also sought to establish whether there were variations in the uses of radio and ICTs among citizens in both cases, based on variables such as gender and age. Based on collected data, the study ultimately also sought to identify the constraints and opportunities in the use of radio and ICTs by Africans in conflict situations. This is important for, among other things, future policy making.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

The role of radio and new media in Africa has attracted considerable scholarly attention, especially following the introduction of multiparty politics on the continent in the early 1990s. Among other things, researchers have been interested in understanding the role of both radio and new media in promoting democracy and development (see Ronning, 1995; Nyamnjoh, 2005). Even the role of radio in conflict situations has also attracted some attention, especially in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, where sections of the

media, including radio and newspapers, gave editorial support to the conflict (Gourevitch, 1998; Thompson, 2007).

The articulation of the role of the media in both democracy and development is in many instances informed by Jurgen Habermas's notion of the public sphere (see Bosch, 2011). The public sphere concept generally relates to a media system that provides accessible space for the articulation of 'rational-critical' discussion and debate by the citizenry. Such debate and discussion is considered an essential ingredient of both democracy and development. Habermas used the concept in his seminal inquiry into the rise and decline of a bourgeois participatory democracy centred on critical-rational debate. He defined the public sphere as

> the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatised but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labour. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people's public use of their reason (1992:27).

Coffee shops, salons and other public places were the sites for this debate, whose participants gradually constituted a countervailing force to the authoritarian state of early modern Europe. The bourgeois public sphere offered space in which citizens had access to deliberate about their common affairs and articulate broader social interests, and hence became an institutionalised arena of discursive interaction. Although the concept has been criticised for, among other things, assuming the existence of a universal and all-inclusive public sphere (and therefore being ahistorical), it continues to be used as an analytic category to measure the extent to which the media act as platforms for public participation. In relation to the role of radio in African societies, the concept remains useful, not least because radio is the de facto mass medium in Africa, given its pervasiveness.

In addition to conceptualising the role of the media in relation to the public sphere, the media are also considered to perform other roles including being watchdogs to power, being sources of information, education and entertainment, voices of the voiceless, and so forth. These roles are most commonly assumed in liberal-pluralist approaches to the media (see Curran, 2005).

The above articulations of the role of the media in society, though very important, locate that role within 'normal' or peaceful situations. Given the nature of this study, it is important to also reflect on debate on the role of the media—both old and new—in the context of conflict situations. Probably the most cited reference in this regard is the work of Norwegian scholar Johan Galtung on the subject of what is commonly known as 'war' and 'peace' journalism. Galtung has been highly critical of dominant media representations of conflicts that glamourise war, focus on the dualism of victory and defeat, and are biased in favour of 'official' sources. He advanced the model of "peace journalism," the key components of which included the following: peace-orientation, i.e., humanizing all sides and placing emphasis on the destructive effects of violence and the importance of achieving peace; exploring untruths on both sides; and focusing on solutions rather than victory or defeat (Galtung, 1998). Although the model attracted its fair share of criticism for conceptual and practical weaknesses – such as lack of clarity on the methodology of peace journalism – (see, for example, Shinar, 2009), it remains useful in helping explore the role of media in conflict situations in Africa.

With respect to the appropriation of media (including new media) by citizens caught up in conflict, this study is also informed by the currently thin body of research on the subject in Africa and elsewhere. As Eytan Gilboa (2009) observes, despite the critical significance of the roles played by new media in conflict and conflict resolution, this area "has been relatively ignored, neglected by both scholars and practitioners" (p. 88). The paucity of research and anal-

ysis in this area, he argues, "may be attributed to the difficulties inherent in multidisciplinary research and the absence of adequate tools, models, and frameworks for analysis" (p.89). In his articulation of a framework for analysing the role of media in conflict resolution, Gilboa points to the critical role that the Internet and mobile phone play both in conflict situations and in conflict resolution.

In his exploration of the uses of mobile phones in post-conflict Liberia, Michael L. Best (2011), noted: "In Liberia people cling to their mobile phones as tools for security and safety. They use phones to combat crime, sexual violence, and to help in medical emergencies" (p. 25). Besides being lifestyle tools, mobile phones in conflict or insecure situations in Africa were also lifeline instruments, argues Best. In March 2012, the Liberian police, with the support of the private sector in that country, gave free mobile phones to a group of women in the small town of Weala – one of the most affected by the civil war and where violence against women continued to be rampant – with the instruction to use them to alert the police (via a toll-free number) when any type of security problem was brewing, including domestic violence and other types of violence against women and girls in the area. As a result of this intervention, instances of domestic violence dropped significantly.[5] In light of the foregoing, it is important to note that with the proliferation of new information and communication technologies, some of the roles associated with traditional, institutionalised media are no longer just their preserve.

The Internet, for example, offers a panoply of communicative possibilities which dwarf the mostly linear and time-and-space-bound features of traditional media. Mobile telephony, which is the second area of focus of this paper, continues to attract significant research attention because of its phenomenal growth in Africa and elsewhere, as well as its increasing embeddedness to both old and

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5   See UN report: "From conflict resolution to prevention: connecting Peace Huts to the police in Liberia." (http://www.unwomen.org/2012/09/from-conflict-resolution-to-prevention-connecting-peace-hut-to-the-police-in-liberia/)

new communication technologies. In sub-Saharan Africa, mobile phones have grown so rapidly that between 2000 and 2008, access to them grew from 1 in 50 Africans to over 60 percent (De Bruijn, Nyamnjoh & Brinkman, 2009). In South Africa, access to mobile phones is now well over 80 percent, and is growing.

In many parts of Africa, as Aker and Mbiti (2010: 208) note, mobile phones "have represented the first modern telecommunications infrastructure of any kind" given that the fixed telephone service never went as far as the most remote parts of the continent. The rapid increase in mobile phone coverage has been possible thanks to massive investment in the industry by both local and multinational players, sometimes against considerable odds in the early days. Although the costs of access, both in terms of the mobile phone device and airtime vary from country to country, the past decade has generally seen a lowering of costs across the board, resulting in greater uptake. The fact that there is a huge market for used mobile phones as well as cheap imitation models imported from China makes it far easier to acquire a working phone in Africa. So rapid has the growth in mobile phones been in Africa that some scholars have referred to them as 'the new talking drums of Africa', in reference to the traditional African drum which was the key communicative tool in mostly pre-colonial Africa (see De Bruijn, Nyamnjoh & Brinkman, 2009).

Although research on mobile phones has covered a range of areas such as access, costs, policies among others, this article is interested mostly in research that explores the ways in which citizens and marginalised communities appropriate new media (including mobile phones) for self-expression and for subverting power, especially in authoritarian political contexts. Moyo (2010), for example, explores the manner in which Zimbabwean citizens in the Diaspora appropriated new media – blogs, news websites and 'pirate radio'– to counter state propaganda churned out via the mainstream state-controlled media. The political and economic crisis in Zimbabwe, which began in earnest in 2000, resulted in the closure of democrat-

ic space for many citizens who did not support the ruling party, Zanu-PF (see, Raftopoulos and Savage, 2005; Campbell, 2003; Nyarota, 2006). The closure of privately-owned newspapers by the state made hundreds of journalists and other media workers jobless, and many of them left the country. From their bases in the Diaspora, some of the citizens started online news websites, weblogs and 'pirate radio' stations which provided alternative and oppositional narratives of the crisis, countering the state's version of events. These developments attracted and continue to attract scholarly attention (see Mano and Willems, 2008; Chuma, 2008, 2010).

The use of new media to subvert power has not been confined to Zimbabweans in the Diaspora. Within Zimbabwe itself, citizens engaged with mobile phones and illegal 'pirate radio' to communicate amongst themselves and with the outside world as violence and electoral fraud took centre stage during the 2008 elections (Chuma, 2008; Moyo, 2010). Short message services (SMS) were shared amongst voters – especially opposition voters – with information ranging from safe voting sites to preliminary results for different constituencies. During the xenophobic attacks in Cape Town, foreign nationals also used SMS to warn each other of violent hotspots. Victims also called in on talk show radio programmes to relate their ordeals.

It is clear from the foregoing that citizens appropriate new media to suit their particular circumstances, and any credible approach to the study of usage should take this into account. This article assumes as its point of entry the critical view that the appropriation of technologies, both old and new, takes place in a wider socio-economic and political context which shapes it, even as technology shapes the same social milieu (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003). In both cases under study, the usage of both radio and mobile phones during conflict is considered not just as a one-off phenomenon, but as one shaped by broader political, economic and social circumstances in the two contexts.

Methodology

Given the nature of the inquiry at hand, this study applied a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches, though with a strong qualitative/interpretive bias. An analysis of 'uses' or 'appropriations' of media by citizens lends itself to more than just figures and quantifiable highlights of instances of use. It requires an examination of the contexts in which such use is occurring, including both personal and social contexts.

As highlighted earlier in this article, the principal method used in the research in both cases was in-depth interviewing. Structured interviews were held in Cape Town and Harare between August and November 2010, and involved victims of xenophobic attacks in South Africa and election-related violence in Zimbabwe. Although a random sampling procedure was applied, for convenience purposes the research team selected sites where most violence took place in the two contexts. In Cape Town, interviews were held in the 'townships' where most of the violence occurred in 2008, namely Khayelitsha, Langa and Du Noon. In Zimbabwe, given that the violence was a national phenomenon, and was largely targeted at opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and other civil society activists, the researchers chose Harare and Masvingo as sites of interviews and arranged most of the contacts through the MDC and civil society groups. The interviews comprised both open and closed-ended questions, including brief biographical details of the respondents (such as age and gender), their location in 2008, how they were affected by the event in question, their patterns of use of radio and mobiles, etc. Fifty interviews were held in each of the two case studies, for a total of one hundred. The research teams in both cases were subject to initial training that included ethical guidelines in researching human subjects.

In addition to interviews with individuals, the research team also interviewed editorial staff at selected radio stations which were involved in programming during the conflicts in both cases. The in-

terviews sought to establish how these stations framed the conflicts as well as the extent to which they appropriated new media such as the Internet and mobile phones to enhance their coverage of the events.

Document analysis also formed a lesser part of the methodology in this study. The close scrutiny of relevant documents on radio, mobiles and other new media was aimed at establishing the background historical, contextual as well as theoretical framework for the study. Additionally, the scrutiny of both critical and popular literature on both the elections in Zimbabwe and xenophobic attacks in Cape Town was meant to provide context to the study. Document analysis was therefore critical in order to inform the type and scope of questions raised in the interviews as well as the general thrust of the intellectual inquiry as a whole.

Findings and Discussion

The central role of the mobile phone in the context of crisis

A key finding of this study was the centrality of the mobile phone in the lives of the interviewees in both cases, with mobiles being by far the most used source of information by victims of violence and conflict. Nearly all the interviewees (99 percent) in South Africa stated they possessed a mobile phone during the time of the conflicts in 2008 and relied on it for key information, while 80 percent in Zimbabwe confirmed the same. Although in both cases the use of phones was largely confined to making or receiving calls, as well as sending and receiving text messages, the mobile phone played a key role in keeping the victims of violence abreast of the situation around them in a context where access to information could mean life or death.

It emerged from the interviews – especially in Cape Town – that the mobile phone also occupied a key space in the day-to-day social

lives of citizens before and after the crisis. It served multiple functions in their pursuit of pleasure and recognition in general, and specific functions during emergencies such as during the xenophobic attacks. Although the majority of respondents admitted to having owned rather basic phones in 2008, by the time of the interviews in 2010 they had moved on to smart, Internet-enabled phones which allowed them to spend significant amounts of their time on social networking sites, especially on Facebook. The convenience the mobile phone provided had become so naturalised that the majority of the respondents found it difficult to imagine the world before the device was introduced.

However, during the xenophobic attacks in Cape Town, the mobile phone was a key 'must-have' for the victims. A typical victim was aged between 25 and 30, male or female, who had arrived in South Africa within the last two years (from 2008), a holder of a Diploma or University degree from Zimbabwe, and worked contract jobs as labourer or waiter/waitress in Cape Town. Although the extent of victimhood varied from being threatened to being injured and displaced, a common feature among all the respondents was their reliance on their phones for information: warnings on violent hotspots, directions to municipal halls or 'protection centres' that the City of Cape Town made available to accommodate the displaced immigrants, updates on whether the situation in the townships had calmed enough for them to return, and, perhaps most important, updating family and friends both in Zimbabwe and overseas on their situation. In a number of instances, the victims received financial support from family members in the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and the United States to help then resume their disrupted lives after the attacks ceased. The mobile phone was the most convenient tool for these transactions.

The use of mobile phones was somehow less pervasive in Zimbabwe (80 percent of respondents) during the 2008 elections. This was partly because the country was in the middle of a severe eco-

nomic crisis at the time and mobile phones were still fairly expensive gadgets for many people. The critical shortage of SIM cards at the time also meant that even those with handsets could not get connected. Further, it emerged from the interviews that the generally bad network coverage by the three service providers in the country (Econet, Telecel and CellOne) resulted in limited access to mobile communication. However, among the respondents who made regular use of the phone – especially Harare residents – it was an extremely important resource in the context of horrific state-sponsored violence against members of the opposition. They used the phone to communicate with family and friends and warn each other of violent hotspots, communicated with their political parties and civil society groups to report on attacks, and probably most importantly, opposition election agents filed election results from the local voting sites to the national vote-counting centres as a way of preventing rigged results. In some cases the local opposition agents took photos of the final results and uploaded them on the Internet, constantly updating citizens within and out of Zimbabwe who were keenly following the elections.

Another interesting aspect of the usage of mobile phones in Zimbabwe was the circulation of viral SMS messages among mostly opposition voters who subscribed to the activist civil society portal called kubatana.net. (www.kubatana.net). According to its founder Beverly Clarke, the portal sent out a total of 78 text messages to a list of subscribers between 25th March and 4th August 2008. This period covered both the harmonised elections in March and the presidential election re-run in June. According to Clarke, the list of subscribers grew phenomenally from 1040 in March to 4200 by August, largely because of the popularity and relevance of the messages they sent out. She wrote:

> The list of subscribers almost doubled in the two weeks following the 29th March election, and then doubled again in the months between the harmonised election and the presidential election run off. This growth was

> largely due to word of mouth—one person receiving our SMS updates, sharing them with a friend or colleague, and this person contacting us to subscribe as well... information in these text messages included reminders to go and vote, clarification about the voting process, House of Assembly and Senate results, inspiration, hope, requests for feedback, announcements of events, offers to share relevant information by post and email, and suggestions for citizen activism.[6]

A sample of the messages sent out shows a variety of interesting details relevant to the election. For example, on the morning of the election, on 29th March, the following SMS was sent out: "Kubatana! Some poll stations asking foreign born for renunciation certificates. This is NOT a requirement, Call Zim Lawyers to assist-091278995/04251468." This was a very critical message because Zimbabwean law does not allow dual citizenship and authorities could easily stop especially foreign born Whites (suspected by the government to be opposition supporters) from voting on the pretext of not presenting a certificate renouncing their foreign citizenship. The Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights, a non-profit body, offered free legal services to anybody victimised by the state during the elections. Other messages provided basic information about where to vote, the contact details of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission encouraging citizens to phone them to complain about the delays in results, and updates on both local and global news reports.

Finally, with regard to the usage of mobile phones in both cases, it emerged that gender was, albeit in a small way, a factor in how citizens appropriated mobile phones in the context of conflict. From the interviews, it emerged that most of the men had access to and made use of mobile phones, while some women did not get to use such phones (only 20 percent of women in Zimbabwe had phones in 2008) and therefore had to rely on radio or word of mouth. For those with handsets, especially in Cape Town, they used them mainly to send "Please Call Me" messages because they did not have air-

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6   Personal communication with Beverly Clarke, 8th September, 2010.

time. This is an important finding which reflects the connection between gendered structural inequalities in general and access to communication.

The role of community radio

Another interesting finding was that local/community radio could be declining in influence in contexts of high media density such as South Africa, where they have to compete with numerous other sources of information. This is a critical departure from the highly acclaimed role that community media and alternative media played as nodes of 'independent' critique and information during the Apartheid era.

The majority of respondents (80 percent) in Cape Town said they did not rely on local radio stations for information on the violence. While one could argue that this naturally makes sense given the nature of the conflict and the fact that many of the respondents were in constant movement as they sought refuge, this argument becomes difficult to sustain if one considers that most of the respondents said they actually relied on TV, national or commercial radio and mobile phones. The TV and national radio provided a global/national picture of the violence, while mobile phones were sources of more intimate information such as updates from and to family and friends affected by the violence. The most popular radio stations cited in Cape Town were national stations SAFM and Metro FM.

However, the fact that the majority of xenophobic attack victims did not rely on community radio for news does not take away the fact that these radio stations covered the violence. Both Bush and Tygerberg radio stations deployed journalists to cover the attacks, and relied on the police, non-governmental organisations, local authorities and the accounts by victims for their stories. They also received tip-offs and updates from members of the public via SMS and

phone calls. For Bush radio, the coverage was two-fold: news bulletins giving updates on latest developments, as well as its daily talk show 'Saki Sizwe' (Building the Nation). During the attacks, the show regularly hosted a guest from the Refugee Forum, a non-profit organisation that offered assistance to victims of the violence. According to station manager Adrian Louw, the majority of callers on the talk show expressed outrage at the ongoing attacks and in some cases offered valuable information such as the location of temporary housing facilities made available by the City of Cape Town for the victims. Although the talk shows were generally themed around what was happening at the time, there were also sessions that focused on the role that Africans outside South Africa played in support of the anti-Apartheid struggle. According to Louw:

> At Bush radio we also put emphasis on our history. When we were in exile during the Apartheid days, when we went to Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Zambia and many other African countries, which embraced us with open hands. So we did vox pops with the general public. We wanted to know why South Africans were turning up against the very people who had helped them in their darkest days (Interview, 29 April 2011).

Besides treating the attacks as xenophobic, Bush radio also highlighted what Louw refers to as "economic gangsterism" as a motive for the violence in its news bulletins. This was particularly true of attacks on Somali shopkeepers, who operated shops in the 'townships' and offered competitive bargains which their local South African rivals failed to match.

The picture was significantly different in Zimbabwe, where the state still held monopoly over the airwaves during the period under review. The Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) radio and TV stations churned out propaganda news items in support of the Zanu-PF party, therefore leaving supporters of the opposition with little option but to revert to so-called 'pirate' radio stations and mobile phones. The most popular sources of information among the

respondents were radio VOA and Radio VOP, both of which broadcast on short wave from outside Zimbabwe.

All the three 'pirate stations' provided comprehensive, though largely pro-opposition coverage of the elections, from the pre-election campaigns, the voting process, the violence and the results. An interesting feature of the coverage by these radio stations is that they employed a vast network of stringers across the country including the most remote parts, and these journalists filed copy using their mobile phones. All three stations had provisions whereby a stringer with a story but no airtime would simply send a text message to a toll-free number and the station would call back and allow him or her to file the story by phone. Members of the public who witnessed violent activities or other potential story ideas also had access to toll-free numbers, and radio stations would assign a stringer closest to the scene to follow up the story. According to Gerry Jackson, station manager for SW Radio Africa, her station had the following in place during its coverage of the elections:

> We had a mobile phone in Zimbabwe where listeners could leave a text or voice message with their contact details. This information was then emailed to us and we would call the listeners back to take part in an open forum. Twitter was not applicable to the Zimbabwe (2008) poll at that time due to the lack of broadband. We sent news headlines into Zimbabwe three times a week to 30,000 (mobile phone) subscribers to this free service. Our website carried all breaking news around the election and was a vital resource for those interested in the Zimbabwe situation at the time. We had a key role in exposing the violence. We named and shamed perpetrators via SMS and our website and SW broadcasts (Interview, 6 November 2010).

The use of 'pirate' radios was, however, fraught with real danger. In the run up to the elections, some non-profit organisations distributed free radio short wave radio sets to mostly rural-based citizens to allow them access to alternative information. However, following its loss during the March 29th election, Zanu-PF went on a violent confiscation spree, seizing these radio sets, forcing citizens to either hand them over or pretend not to have them and continue to tune in

to pirate radio stations in secret, mainly in the forests away from home.[7]

Radio and the appropriation of new media

Both community radio stations in South Africa and 'pirate' radio stations in the Zimbabwe case study exploited the potential of new media to enhance coverage of the two violent situations in a fairly substantial way. This is especially so if we consider that this was in the era before popular social platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. In South Africa, interviews with radio personnel at Bush Radio and Radio Tygerberg showed that in addition to deploying journalists to the theatres of violence, they also benefitted from phone-ins and SMS updates from members of the public for their coverage of the violence. Both stations did not do live streaming at the time and did not have feedback facilities on their websites, and attribute this mainly to their limited budgets. Station managers at both stations also conceded that they did not make deliberate or special allocation of resources towards the xenophobic attack stories per se, not least because of budgetary constraints. The attacks were therefore covered just like any other criminal activities in the country. Both Bush and Tygerberg radio stations also argued that since national radio and television were giving extensive coverage to the attacks, it was futile to compete with them. Viewed against the backdrop of the highly limited use of community radio as a source of information in Cape Town by the victims, this becomes interesting in the sense that it somehow negates the normative role of community media, which are supposed to constitute local public spheres for citizens sharing the same geography or interests.

In Zimbabwe, the 'pirate' radio stations adopted a call-back approach (mentioned above) which enabled members of the public with stories to contact the station, which would call them back on

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7   Interviews in Masvingo, November 2010.

their mobiles for more details, or deploy their stringers closest to the theatre of action to give coverage. The stations' websites were also regularly updated, while live streaming was possible but largely for Zimbabweans in the Diaspora. Radio VOP was particularly strong when it came to updating its website and taking up feedback from readers/listeners who contacted the station to report on events unfolding in their communities, especially cases of state-orchestrated violence.[8] In fact, it can be argued that 'pirate' radio stations in Zimbabwe generally practised both professional and citizen forms of journalism in the coverage of the 2008 elections.

There was a correlation between innovative appropriation of new media and popularity of radio stations. In other words, those radio stations that fully exploited the convergence capabilities of new media were cited by most of the respondents as their primary sources of information during the violent events. This was so particularly in Zimbabwe during the 2008 elections.

Concluding discussion

The findings of this article – which is part of a larger study on media convergence and development in Africa – are important for one's understanding of the role of Africa's most pervasive mediums and communication tools. Although this particular article focused on the uses of radio and mobiles in the context of violent and life-threatening situations, the findings can arguably apply to 'normal', everyday situations as well. They point to the critical role that mobiles play in the daily experiences of Africans today and how that role is certain to increase as the costs of access become lower and broadband for mobiles becomes more common. They also provide important insight into the role that 'pirate' radio can play as a key source of independent information in a context of an authoritarian political establishment which prohibits free media.

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8   Interview with John Masuku, Executive Director, Radio VOP, August 2010.

The findings also suggest a number of other things. First, that radio and mobile phones remain critical avenues through which Africans send and receive information. This is important because, for policy and practical purposes, the issue of access to these vital sources of information is necessary for active citizenship. Policymakers, especially in restricted media environments such as Zimbabwe, will need to understand that the existence of legislation curtailing free expression and limiting media ownership may negate, but will certainly not stop citizens finding alternative and creative ways of accessing and generating information. In Africa, it is important therefore to create information and media policy regimes that facilitate increased citizen access to radio and mobiles (as well as the Internet). As the study revealed, these media can play critical, even life-saving roles in the context of violence.

Second, the study shows that appropriating new media by radio stations can enhance their newsgathering processes while promoting participatory cultures and practices among listeners and audiences. The period covered by this study is five years ago, and since then a lot has happened in terms of the proliferation of new media and social media platforms. Radio stations have naturally adapted to this, albeit in varying degrees. It is important that radio stations in Africa be adept at appropriating new media to help tell their stories better as well as to attract and retain audiences. This is important not only for their roles in society, but also for their very survival. African audiences increasingly have access to a range of news sources and therefore have increased choices. Should radio stations fail to adapt to these changes, they risk being irrelevant.

Third, there is a link between gender (and class) and access to both radio and mobiles. It emerged from the study that men had more access to and exploited more facilities on the mobiles, while women had scant access to mobiles, which they largely used to send 'call back' messages. What was not clear and perhaps needs further research is whether having limited access to the full exploitation of

the facilities of the mobile phone made women more vulnerable to the violence in this particular case. The gender dynamic in the use of media is an important finding for policymakers. Addressing gender imbalances in society is important for a range of reasons, including the creation of equitable access to media and promotion of active citizenship.

Fourth, the findings suggest that the traditional conceptualisation of community radio as the natural local public sphere may no longer hold true as new forms of mediated socialisation emerge, especially around the mobile phone. The increasing number of Africans owning mobile phones and using them for a variety of things means that the mobile phone is perhaps the mass medium of the future on the continent. This is because phones are no longer just used for making and receiving calls. The introduction of broadband 3G in Zimbabwe in 2010, for example, saw a significant number of users using mobiles for social networking, banking and to access the Internet. In South Africa, the recent drop in broadband prices augurs well for mobile phone users. During interviews, respondents argued that should there be a repeat of the events of 2008 in both Zimbabwe and South Africa, they would be able to exploit the multiple facilities of their mobiles even more to access and send out information relating to their situations, hence mitigating their vulnerability. Although radio, including community radio and other traditional media continue to be vital sources of information and journalism that citizens require to make informed decisions, the Internet-enhanced mobile phone allows users to access all this information on a click and further, allows users to network with the outside world beyond the institutionalised gatekeeping of traditional media.

This study set out to establish the role and uses of radio and mobiles in conflict situations in two African countries, less as a detailed comparative endeavour than an exploration of two cases as a way of identifying and documenting the lessons that can be learned. What emerges is a picture of the centrality of both old and new me-

dia in the generation and reception of critical information in the lives of citizens caught up in conflict.

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