


# Play on Twitter During Health Crisis in Non-Democratic Context: Gratification or Dissent?

Social Media + Society  
January-March 2024: 1–11  
© The Author(s) 2024  
Article reuse guidelines:  
sagepub.com/journals-permissions  
DOI: 10.1177/20563051231224404  
journals.sagepub.com/home/sms  


Limukani Mathe  and Gilbert Motsaathebe

## Abstract

There is scholarly debate on whether digital political participation influence decision-making or merely make citizens feel good. Using digital public sphere theory and play, this article explores political participation on Twitter during the COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe. The study applies a qualitative content analysis on tweets as it answers questions: does perspective by media users in a health crisis exert political change and in what way does play on digital spheres induce participation for gratification purposes? The findings of the study reflect the use of conspiratorial satire, hyperbole, and propaganda in the COVID-19 pandemic as media users laugh at poor health infrastructure, corruption and authoritarianism. We argue that netizens' political participation on social media is somehow overrated for it has not generated meaningful change in non-democratic context but gives the media user, a sense of gratification for scoffing at the ruling regime.

## Keywords

digital public sphere, play, conspiratorial satire, hyperbole, gratification

## Introduction

Big media's social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and WhatsApp afford users with utilities such as emojis, fast texting, video-formats, and other unique features for communication. Political participation through these sites has become very fast and digitally accessible to everyone connected. Audience studies explore how media users have become more cultured as content creators, players, producers, and consumers of their own content (Banks, 2002; Burgess, 2006; Mathe, 2023). Media users enjoy creating content as Stephenson (1988) put it that mass media outlets could have vanished if audiences never had pleasure in them. Similarly, Mathe (2023) notes that digital platforms such as Facebook and Twitter could have vanished if content creators had less amusement in them. This article uses the concept of play to explore how media users participate or interact in health crisis on digital platforms. Playfulness on digital public sphere is often depicted within contexts of contention as users resort to satire or humor (Mathe, 2023; Mutsvairo & Karam, 2018). Some studies have shown how media users use social media for propaganda through humor and other forms of satire (Chibuwe & Munoriyarwa, 2022; Matsilele, 2019, 2022; Matsilele & Ruhanya, 2021; Mpofu, 2021b). Most of these studies reflect laughter or humor by

subalterns in digital political activism. In other words, these studies show how online participants engage in play-like activities to discuss political issues affecting their daily lives.

In the context of health crisis (specifically the COVID-19 pandemic) in Zimbabwe, some studies have shown how netizens on SNSs exploit satire and humor to discuss socio-economic and political issues (Chibuwe & Munoriyarwa, 2022; Mpofu, 2021a; Msimanga et al., 2022; Tshuma et al., 2022). Msimanga et al. (2022) argue that through the use of memes as forms of humor in the face of tragedy, content creators somehow possess a "sense of power" as they mock the ruling regime. In fact, most studies on the use of satire and humor in digital political spheres amplify dissidence or subversiveness in the face of despotism (Chibuwe & Munoriyarwa, 2022; Matsilele, 2022; Mpofu, 2021a; Msimanga et al., 2022; Ndlovu, 2021; Tshuma et al., 2022). However, these cyber-optimistic studies ignore the unsubstantiated effect of the so-called digital resistance in non-democratic contexts.

University of North-West, South Africa

### Corresponding Author:

Limukani Mathe, Indigenous Language Media in Africa (ILMA), University of North-West, Mahikeng, Private Bag X2046, Mmabatho 2735, South Africa.  
Email: limukanimathe@yahoo.com



Using the COVID-19 pandemic context, this article argues that online communicative styles are not only limited to satire and humor. This article takes a different approach by analyzing conspiratorial satire, hyperbole (exaggeration of political realities), propaganda and misinformation as artifacts of online participation. The article argues that digital public spheres also offer media users with a sense of gratification through freedom of expression. We do not define gratification as the “sense of power” as expressed by Msimanga et al. (2022); but gratification is within the sense of individual satisfaction for airing out perspective in a digital public sphere. In other words, we use the term gratification to refer to the satisfaction in play on social media.

Having been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic from the late 2019, netizens in Zimbabwe took to Twitter to discuss issues arising from the pandemic and how their normal lives were impacted. Social media as a digital space was awash with the infodemic more especially the politics imposed by the lockdowns, social distancing, sanitizing, and masking to minimize the spread of the coronavirus. The lockdowns were somehow politicized by most despotic governments shrinking the democratic space. Digital protest and political contestations were evident on Twitter. The scholarly debate is whether online deliberations exert political changes or just make the netizens feel good or active for challenging or ridiculing governments. Some studies have shown that most of the online participation make media users feel good (Hindman, 2009; Shulman, 2009); while others argue that social media has had less impact in despotic contexts (Mathe & Motsaathebe, 2022; Mathe, 2023; Mutsvairo & Karam, 2018). Contributing to this debate, we use the theory of digital public sphere to analyze tweets in health crisis within the non-democratic context of Zimbabwe. The article grapples with questions: does perspective by media users in a health crisis exert political change and in what way does play on digital spheres induce participation for gratification purposes?

## Context of the Study

The ruling party in Zimbabwe, has had ultimate control over the state-controlled media for political communication (Mathe, 2018). Autocratic rule manifest through suppression of the media, factional journalism, and clampdown on oppositional politics (Chuma et al., 2020; Mathe & Osunkunle, 2019). Since 1980, the country has experienced forms of violence, voter intimidation, labeling, trolling, and contestations for political power (Mathe, 2020a; Mathe & Osunkunle, 2019). The government led by the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) could clampdown on any opposition movement that threatens its dominance. Characterized by political violence even from the experience of a civil war called *Gukurahundi* in the early 1980s, Zimbabwe has experienced continual political bigotry and ferocity. Between 2000 and 2008, supporters of the

Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) were harassed, tortured, and murdered.

In the late 1990s, the country saw the rise of strikes, unemployment, student demonstrations, and complaints of corruption and inflation. ZANU-PF went violent on its election campaign characterized by “dirty,” “trash,” “pregnant with threats and promises,” “accusations,” “absurdities”; and “littered with violent political messages,” “innuendos,” and “mudslinging” against any opposition (Sylvester, 1990, p. 394). Chari (2010, p. 4) notes that the ruling party could “launch a virulent media campaign whenever they suspected the possibility of its hegemony can be eroded.” The arrival of MDC in the political sphere in 1999 “presented Zanu-PF with the most formidable threat to its political security” (Chuma, 2018, p. 2391). ZANU-PF’s government immediately acquired white owned farms for popularity sake among war veterans and its supporters, while setting off a “series of political, economic, and diplomatic crises” (Chuma, 2018, p. 2391). ZANU-PF’s politics and rhetorics took “an increasingly vehement nationalist and anti-imperialist cast around the long-standing demand for land redistribution in the country” (Raftopoulos, 2002, p. 413). The land reform agenda of the liberation struggle was backed by war veteran and the army, and Zimbabwe was economically sanctioned by the West between 2000 and 2002. From henceforth, relations between the West and the ruling regime have not been beneficial as the ruling regime continues to blame the West for sponsoring political upheaval.

Often opposition supporters were subject to intimidation and torture resulting in murder (Raftopoulos, 2002, p. 416). In 2000–2002, there was “constant harassment of the independent press” (Raftopoulos, 2002, p. 414) and “suppressive legislation on association, meetings and media preventing the opposition from exercising their basic rights in the years prior to the elections and during the campaign itself” (Volan, 2005, p. 1). Between 2000 and 2002, the government of Zimbabwe passed repressive media laws such as the Broadcasting Services Act (BSA), the Public Order Security Act (POSA), the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA), and Criminal Law (Codification and Reform Act). It is noteworthy that ZANU-PF used the state-controlled media as its own apparatus. The government unleashed violence on private journalists and the private media for exposing corruption. The government perceived private owned media as the mouthpiece of the opposition. In April 2000 and January 2001, the printing machines of a private owned newspaper, *The Daily News* was bombed as it was highly critical of government. Later in 2003, *The Daily News* was again banned then got relaunched after the issuing of license by the Zimbabwe Media Commission (ZMC). The private press and journalists were “sole endangered species in a dictatorial establishment” of the ZANU-PF government (Chuma, 2005, p. 56). As aforementioned, several media laws were enforced to silence opposition and the private media as the government accused editors of criminal

defamation (Mathe, 2020c). Harassment of journalists worsened due to economic and political turmoil.

Violation of human rights has been ongoing even through the enforcing of the Cyber and Data Protection Act, which limits freedom of expression on digital spheres. There has been the extension of journalists' abduction, torture, victimization, and murder. In 1999, an editor of *The Standard* newspaper and other journalists were abducted and tortured for publishing what was viewed as classified (Nieman reports, 2000). About 100 people died in 2008 due to disputed elections, 16 journalists were reported jailed and 23 abducted, and harassed (*Community to Protect Journalists [CPJ]*, 2008). In 2015, a journalist and political activist, Itai Dzamara was abducted and has not been found since then. In 2020, a prominent journalist Hopewell Chin'ono was jailed for exposing corruption. In the month of October, 2022, five journalists were reported harassed, assaulted, and blocked from political events (CPJ, 2022). The internet arrived as the unregulated public sphere for alternative journalism and political activism and participation. Unregulated online news reporting were labeled guerrilla form of journalism (Mugari, 2008), while digital political activism was interpreted acts of dissidence by dark forces (Mathe, 2023; Matsilele, 2022). Oppositional voices gained popularity through digital spaces (Mathe, 2023). However, undemocratic rule has intensified even in the post-Mugabe era. Emmerson Mnangagwa's government (successor of Robert Mugabe from 2017) is portrayed as worse than his predecessor. Between, October 2020 and 2023, the cabinet of Zimbabwe amended Criminal Law (Codification and Reform Act) into a "Patriotic Bill" to criminalize citizens opposing the government for international recognition. The opposition party, Citizen Coalition for Change (CCC) of Nelson Chamisa has become the prey of Mnangagwa's administration. This article, therefore, analyses user-generated content on Twitter during the COVID-19 pandemic in a semi-autocratic and undemocratic context.

Thus, using this non-democratic context in contrast with the COVID-19 pandemic, the article analyses how the Twitter space was used for political participation as we question the effectiveness of digital public sphere at a time of health crisis and explore how play in the form of satire reflected dissention. Twitter mirrored fierce political contestation and netizen dissention in the pandemic. Given the ongoing debate on the limitations of digital participation in non-democratic contexts, the article gives salience to participation regardless of the political outcome. On the contrary, the article reflects how participation on digital public spheres gets limited in a health or social crisis within a non-democratic context.

## Digital Public Sphere

Social media are viewed as digital public spheres that enable citizens to converge, deliberate, and share content. Citizens engage in political discussions through sites such as social platforms, commentary forums (Twitter, Facebook,

WhatsApp, and Tiktok), blogs and other (Mathe, 2023; Mathe & Motsaathebe, 2022; Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002). Discursive communities are formed on digital public spheres as electronic town meetings accessed through digital technologies (Mathe & Caldwell, 2017; Mathe, 2017; Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002). Thus, digital technologies alter ways of information distribution and consumption (Papacharissi, 2010; Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002). Several advantages of digital public spheres include free participation, access to fast and open information (Dahlberg, 1998; Oates, 2008; Papacharissi, 2002). However, there is an ongoing debate to establish whether online deliberations can be meaningful to influence decision-making. Common knowledge is that digital public spheres reflect various communicative styles and participation by the citizens (Mathe, 2023; Schäfer, 2015). Beyond the commonalities of communicative styles, is the argument: what kinds of participation and communication are desirable (Ferree et al., 2002; Wessler, 2008). The pro-participatory public sphere advocate for a rational, consensus oriented, and civil deliberation. Liberal theorists, on the contrary, desire a public sphere whose communication structures are representative of citizens as societal stakeholders especially during elections (Dahlberg, 1998). Agonistic or constructionists advocate for confrontational, emotional, narrative, and even disruptive kinds of communication empowering the citizen or a social group (Mouffe, 1999).

Habermas' (1989) public sphere theory is mainly criticized for valuing rationality from the lens of the bourgeois, on the contrary, neglecting agonistic dissenting voices (Dahlberg, 2004; Mathe & Motsaathebe, 2023; Mouffe, 1999). Supporting an agonistic public sphere, Mouffe (1999) notes that rational debates are not always possible but there should be room for dissenting voices within a confrontational and emotional platform. Habermas's (1989) criticism of traditional public spheres came at time when the mass media was major but deficient of rational debates. Critics of the structural system of the public sphere, note that legacy media is controlled by the powerful (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; McChesney, 1999); and digital public spheres have also become susceptible to news forces of power. McChesney (1999) notes that citizens angered and frustrated by the political status quo can be easily entangled to believe alternative agendas by "populist neo-authoritarian forces" that undermine the democratic space they purport to achieve. Pedro-Carañana et al. (2018) support this notion that

social and political movements occupy the digital public sphere by combining grassroots organisation efforts and social mobilisation in the public squares and the streets with creative and innovative, communicative production in online social networks even if notable influence has been temporary and susceptible to being assimilated by the system. (p. 10)

Digital public spheres alter into echo chambers that reverberate narrowed outlook of perspective (Demuyakor, 2021;

Shirky, 2011; Sunstein, 2017). Cyber-pessimists note that audience fragmentation has become an effect of these discursive spaces (Mathe, 2020b) as they produce filter bubbles that hide other information (Pariser, 2011). Content creators can inform, misinform and disinform the public to accomplish a certain agenda. Political participation in these digital networking spaces is often challenged by propaganda, contestation between political forces, and toxicity to control ideology resulting in echo chambers (Shirky, 2011; Sunstein, 2017) that promote a “narrow outlook that is unwilling to embrace divergent opinions” (Demuyakor, 2021, p. 5). A fewer people exposed to echo chambers may receive biased information or misinformation and fake news making them feel a “false sense of empowerment” (Papacharissi, 2002, p. 16). By so doing, digital public spheres such as social media become prone to all kinds of online participation such as misinformation, fake news, and even conspiracy theories especially during a social or health crisis (Enders et al., 2023; Jamieson & Albarracín, 2020; Mathe & Motsaathebe, 2022).

In this article, we critique online participation during the COVID-19 in Zimbabwe. Some studies have shown that during the pandemic, social media are prone to conspiracy theories (Enders et al., 2023; Jamieson & Albarracín, 2020) playing a key role in disseminating misinformation and all sorts of political prejudices. Defining a conspiracy as a “secret plot by two or more powerful actors,” Douglas et al. (2019, p. 3) show how media users on social media disseminate conspiracy theories about safety vaccines and all sorts of political ambushes during the COVID-19 pandemic. By definition, misinformation refers to incorrect and false information deliberately disseminated to mislead people. Thus, within a historical context of genocide, revolutions, witch hunts, and prejudice in Zimbabwe, this article analyses how Twitter affordances were exploited for expression during the COVID-19. Since digital public spheres accommodate different kinds of communicative styles such as satire and humor, the concept of play (which embodies satire, humor) is used to analyze even other forms of media use. The article argues that in health crisis, participation is not only limited to satire and humor as we combine the digital public theory with play to unveil all kinds of communicative styles and political discourses on Twitter during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Play and Satire

Play as theory embodies humor and satire, and reflects how media users enjoy texting on platforms. The theory rests on the assumption that media users enjoy using the media for their subjective purposes (Mathe, 2023; Stephenson, 1967). The concept of play explores how audiences use media for their own pleasure. Stephenson (1988) shows that mass communication tools could have vanished if audiences never had pleasure in them. In the same manner, this article argues that digital public spheres such as Twitter could have vanished if the subalterns had no pleasure in them. Literature has shown

that citizens in Zimbabwe turned to the internet so as to escape undemocratic media laws and political violence (Mathe, 2023; Matsilele, 2022). Stephenson (1967) argues that the pleasure found in media use is an escape from psychological pain. Contemporary scholars have noted that social media affords media users the pleasures of content creation (Burgess, 2006; Caldwell, 2013, 2020; Carey, 2009; Glasser, 2000; Mathe, 2023). This article explores how media users interacted on Twitter during the painful COVID-19 pandemic. Just like other countries in Africa, Zimbabwe has a fragile economy with high unemployment, social inequalities, pitiable healthcare infrastructure and domestic unrest or conflicts. Since early 2020, the country experienced a series of strikes by healthcare practitioners due to low salaries, lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and other poor healthcare facilities. These socio-political events were taken to Twitter by netizens to register their dissatisfactions against the ruling regime. Twitter as the digital public sphere enables users to freely express themselves even with a sense of humor. Humor has often been used to lighten the mood, release tension “defuse aggression or distance the unpleasant” (Linstead, 1988, p. 142); even during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Caldwell (2020, p. 6) argues that media users enjoy socializing on digital spaces in such a way that they become completely “preoccupied in an activity where each action and thought follows inevitably from the one before, being fully aware without being self-conscious.” Content creators or players ritually involve themselves in social interaction, “drawing themselves in fellowship and commonality” (Carey, 2009, p. 15). In other words, media users engage in these platforms for enjoyment, which includes satisfying their curiosity and escaping reality. For this reason, digital spaces have become ritualistic places of interaction (Caldwell, 2013) where players exercise more creativity and agency than before, combined with a surge in both the participation in and power of voluntary work and “productive leisure” (Burgess, 2006, p. 202). Through the use of images as metaphors and other “harmonic counterpoints,” content creators amplify their voices on social media (Burgess, 2006, p. 207). In the process of amplification, some narratives are downplayed while others are elevated through satire (Mathe, 2023).

In other words, the play concept explores how media users find gratification through the subjective use of the media just like the uses and gratification theory, which explains how audiences choose a type of media for the purposes of gratification (Glasser, 2000, p. 24). Some scholars note that media users enjoy digital participation manifest in the use of a hyperbole and generalization (Ajiboye, 2013; Mathe & Caldwell, 2017; Woolgar, 2002). Woolgar (2002) refers to digital hyperbole as “cyberbole” that creates a sense of polarization and generalization. According to Mathe (2023), hyperbole refers to the exaggeration of political realities. Some studies note that some communicative styles cannot influence decision-making but just make media users

feel active (Ferree et al., 2002; Hindman, 2009; Shulman, 2009; Wessler, 2008). Thus, through a qualitative content analysis, this article reflects on the communicative styles and participation on Twitter's digital sphere during the COVID-19.

## Methodology

This study applied a qualitative content analysis on user-generated content on Twitter to analyze the discursive activities as response to politically related COVID-19 conditions. Through a Twitter researcher account, we extracted user-generated content from the Zimbabwean discursive community (Zwitter) directed by the "trends for you." We used one twitter handle (a participant in the Zimbabwean Twitter sphere) for combined data extraction and coding purposes since we were depending on "trends for you" and needed a researcher account that was part of the community. Data extraction occurred between March 2020 to February 2021 as this was during COVID-19 surge in Zimbabwe. We studied tweets as elements of social events shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic. Usually on Twitter, trending political events are earmarked by keywords within the "trends for you" folder of the discursive algorithm. Trending stories on Twitter are easily traceable by clicking on the "trends for you" folder. The "trends for you" folder has an advantage like hashtags as it opens up all content linked to the event within a discursive intergroup. The weaknesses of such selection of data through "trends for you" is that the algorithm suggests content for the media user within a Twitter discursive community. The "trends for you" folders during the COVID-19 pandemic ranged from COVID-19 lockdowns, COVID-19 vaccines, COVID-19 casualties, death of army generals, arrests of opposition players (earmarked by their popular names, hidden in this study for ethical purposes) and other related COVID-19 pandemic stories. A click on the trending stories led the study to the tweets from different media users including government officials and opposition players. The tweet was the unit of analysis. From the trending stories, we extracted 350 tweets. The collected tweets were copied and pasted on Microsoft word and then uploaded into the NVivo software tool for qualitative analysis. We used an inductive approach (an open view) to implement the analysis of the tweets. We consider content selected for the study from "trends for you" representative of political events that transpired during the COVID-19 period in Zimbabwe. We ethically delinked verified usernames from the tweets analyzed for anonymity and confidentiality. Tweets analyzed are traceable on the Zimbabwean Twitter sphere.

## Findings

To answer the questions of the study: (does perspective by media users in a health crisis exert political change and in

what way does play on digital spheres induce participation for gratification purposes?); tweets were categorized into three segments namely satire/conspiratorial satire, exaggeration of political realities (hyperbole), and propaganda and misinformation as shown in Table 1. These three categories define the content extracted from the Zimbabwean Twitter during the COVID-19 pandemic. As cyber-pessimists put it, the findings reflect audience fragmentation between the ruling regime and opposition. Groups fragmented between the ruling regime and the opposition produced content that backed their political agendas to their own self-gratifications. Twitter sphere was toxic of polarized perspective through satire, hyperbole or generalization, conspiracy theories and misinformation (Enders et al., 2023; Jamieson & Albarracin, 2020). In other words, citizens gathered to play and hype each other's imaginations as they opposed and ridiculed the regime- generating echo chambers (Shirky, 2011; Sunstein, 2017) infested with misinformation and conspiratorial satire. The activity of ridicule through digital public sphere gave them a "sense of false empowerment" (Papacharissi, 2002, p. 16.) as content produced did not seem to cause any political change.

## Hyperbole and Conspiratorial Satire (Polarized Perspective)

Audience fragmentation for and against the opposition, and ruling regime resulted in polarity of perspective. While lockdowns enforced citizen adherence to governmental COVID-19 policies, Twitter reflected citizen protest (of course not indicating offline protest). Netizens ridiculed the government for failing to clampdown the COVID-19 pandemic. Laughter at the government's failure to clampdown COVID-19 was reflected in the conspiratorial satire. Political content mirrored citizen mistrust of the ruling government through conspiratorial satire. While people died of COVID-19 including army generals, the tweets reflected ridicule and celebration. Netizens were fully engaged in imagining the causes of death despite the established news that the ruling elites died of COVID-19. Caldwell (2020) shows how media users fully engage themselves in ritualistic self-serving activities that are play-like making them feel good (Hindman, 2009; Shulman, 2009). This shows how the subalterns can emotionally express themselves in the digital public sphere as shown by Mouffe (1999) that rational debates are not always possible but dissenting voices within a confrontational and emotional platform.

Presented below are some of the extracted tweets from discursive community. The data speak to the issue of polarity and generalization of political perspective during the COVID-19 pandemic. It shows how media users playfully suspected foul play by the ruling regime against the opposition, reflecting the undemocratic conditions heightened by COVID-19 lockdowns:

**Table 1.** A Cluster of Tweets During the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Satire/conspiratorial	Hyperbole	Propaganda/misinformation
<p>“You know he has underlying health issues and you know he will need to go to the hospitals and meet patients! We can see through this “promotion”<sup>a</sup></p> <p>“They said they had police clearance! Death is an equaliser”</p> <p>“Wish to advise the Zimbabwean citizens that, COVID-19 is targeting the criminals around the citizens their security is guaranteed”</p> <p>“Perrence Shiri was shot dead by his fellow ZANU bigwigs after a heated meeting where they accused each other of plotting to topple Mnangagwa. Claims that he died of COVID-19 were disputed by his family.”</p> <p>“USD 15B &amp; USD 3,5B went missing under disguise of command Agriculture. It was meant to acquire ventilators, provide hospitals oxygen. Zim is just a COVID hot spot. People will die like flies”</p> <p>“This time they will never rig death or concourt to judge in favour of their beloved ones.”</p> <p>“Do you guys mourn when the nameless ones are dying due to health care mismanagement”</p>	<p>“Red tape alert, they use COVID-19 to eliminate opposition both within and outside their party”</p> <p>“She briefed me of the unsanitary conditions in our jails &amp; her own positive COVID19 test after her unjust detention. Her situation exemplifies the despicable tactics being used by the regime to weaponise this pandemic against opponents”</p> <p>“After weaponising the criminal justice system as his macro-strategy á la gukurahundi<sup>c</sup>, Mnangagwa is jailing opponents without bail to infect them with COVID-19.”</p> <p>“The Lord works in mysterious ways; they incarcerated critics and opposition politics in a blatant attempt to expose them to COVID and now its clearing decks in the corridors of corruption.”</p> <p>“Did you mourn when over 400 MDC members were murdered in 2008? Did you mourn when innocent Zimbabweans were killed in August 2018 and January 2019?<sup>d</sup></p> <p>“It is unafican to shoot and kill innocent people in the streets, when a child asks for fish, you don’t give him a snake, when he asks for bread, you do not give him stones but that’s what your ZANU-PF PF admin has been doing. You jail citizens for simply asking for basics”</p>	<p>“Chiwenga will soon die of poisoning like they did to Perrence Shiri. He is not clever by accepting that. ED<sup>b</sup> wants to make sure he is close to him so that can finish him quick”</p> <p>“Perrence Shiri was shot dead by his fellow ZANU bigwigs after a heated meeting where they accused each other of plotting to topple Mnangagwa. Claims that he died of COVID-19 were disputed by his family”</p> <p>“Let us leave COVID-19 alone people, there is more than we know in these deaths.”</p> <p>“This is what is leading to the unfortunate conspiracy theory that there are certain political players being eliminated in hospitals by political activists hiding behind medical qualifications. In fact, not just political players but medical assassins”</p>

ZANU = Zimbabwe African National Union; MDC = movement for democratic change; ZANU-PF = Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front.

<sup>a</sup>This tweet is attached as story of Vice President Chiwenga’s promotion to Minister of Health in 2020 to tackle the surge of the COVID-19 pandemic.

<sup>b</sup>ED means Emmerson Mnangagwa the President of Zimbabwe.

<sup>c</sup>This tweet is a response to a tweet that appealed for ubuntu (humanism) not to celebrate the demise of army generals and other ZANU-PF elites.

<sup>d</sup>Gukurahundi is a genocide that occurred between 1985 and 1987 in Zimbabwe where more than 20,000 people were killed in a civil war.

She briefed me of unsanitary conditions in our jails and her own positive COVID-19 test after her unjust detention. Her situation exemplifies the despicable tactics being used by the regime to weaponise this pandemic against opponents.

The true tragedy of such actions is the failure of the regime to recognise that COVID-19 knows no political affiliation. It continues to affect countless citizens across the country without discretion. Only sincere and responsible leadership will help slow the spread.

In response to the tweets above, another participant tweeted “it is incorrect to say she got the infection in jail. No one knows when she got it at this stage. Please be responsible.” This scenario of interaction shows exaggeration of political realities. Whether true or false, the tweets politicized the COVID-19 pandemic along the undemocratic context in

Zimbabwe, hyping political events to suit the propaganda by “populist neo-authoritarian forces” (McChesney, 1999). The use of conspiratorial hyperbole was drawn from a history of political contestation and violence. More evidence is shown in this tweet, “after weaponising the criminal justice system as his macro-strategy á la gukurahundi,<sup>1</sup> Mnangagwa is jailing opponents without bail to infect them with COVID-19.” Hyperbole, in other words, shows an exaggeration of political realities and extremely polarized perspective reflective of mistrust during health crisis. Some of the tweets are as shown below:

Deliberately exposing innocent citizens to high risk COVID prisons! Persecution of the opposition. Incarcerating innocent citizens and denying bail to opposition members. Selective application of the law.

Nick, please inform your boss that using the criminal justice system to persecute citizens is morally repugnant and is another black mark on an already blemished reputation. You cannot pretend to care about COVID-19 while depriving people of their most basic rights.

Now is not the time for cheap politicking and irresponsible actions but rather an opportunity to ensure that the spotlight being cast on our public health institutions and prisons results in deliberate corrective action.

As shown by Mathe (2023), conspiratorial satire or hyperbole amplifies voices against the ruling regime. Although there are digital efforts through ridicule or dissention, the influence nonetheless remains temporarily digital (Pedro-Carañana et al., 2018) in play-like “fellowship and commonality” (Carey, 2009, p. 15). Some of the tweets include “COVID is not a joke. You can rig all you want but you cannot rig this virus. It is real and dangerous.” More satire in play-like interactions is as shown below.

wish to advise the Zimbabwean citizens that, COVID-19 is targeting the criminals around the citizens their security is guaranteed.

. . . Perrence Shiri was shot dead by his fellow ZANU bigwigs after a heated meeting where they accused each other of plotting to topple Mnangagwa. Claims that he died of COVID-19 were disputed by his family.

Chiwenga will soon die of poisoning like they did to Perrence Shiri. He is not clever by accepting that ED wants to make sure he is close to him so that can finish him quick.

Let us leave COVID-19 alone people, there is more than we know in these deaths.

Thus, conspiratorial satire often emerges within the context of contention, especially in uncertain times. Some tweets reflected the assumption that something was wrong with the Chinese COVID-19 vaccine used by government officials. Laughing at the demise of government officials, others tweeted, “the supplier knew what he was doing, cleansing the generation.” In addition, another hyperbole maintained that hospitals in Zimbabwe were overwhelmed by the COVID-19, prompting the Minister of Health to publicly say “it would be, however, an exaggeration at this stage, to suggest that our health institutions are overwhelmed by cases of COVID-19” (@Openparlyzw, 2021). This article argues that the exaggeration of political realities was determined by the citizens’ apathy over unhealthy conditions.

The COVID-19 pandemic was used as counterpoint to discuss poor health infrastructure and social ills. Most netizens saw COVID-19 as an equalizing factor between the poor and the rich, the powerful and the powerless, alluding that “at least no one will seek medical attention abroad.” Tweets below reflect laughter over corruption in Zimbabwe:

USD 15B & USD 3.5B went missing under disguise of command Agriculture. It was meant to acquire ventilators, provide hospitals oxygen. Zimbabwe is just a COVID-19 hotspot. People will die like flies.

One ministerial landcruiser bought through croco motors at USD\$480,000 can buy 240 oxygen concentrators that supply 10L/Min. Downgrade your government cruisers to Honda fits. Seeing as it is our money that paid for them in the first place. Now we need our money back in this pandemic!

The US\$60mil stolen could have gone a long way to mitigate the current blood bath from COVID-19. The government had all the time to prepare but instead expounded time on the persecution of voices fighting corruption.

The liberty to engage and challenge the ruling government through digital means especially in a social crisis does give the media user freedom of expression. Although, content produced reflects the socio-economic and political context, however, it cannot be taken at face value because there is always the tilting of facts to suit the political agenda.

## Propaganda and Misinformation

This article argues conspiratorial satire was interlinked with misinformation. To discredit the ruling regime or the opposition and out of frustration, content creators misinformed or misrepresented issues. In the early stages of the coronavirus outbreak, the Defense Minister, Oppah Muchinguri stated that “the coronavirus is the work of God punishing countries who imposed sanctions on us”. Given the tensions between the ruling regime and the West, the Minister of Defense effortlessly mocked the West to her self-satisfaction. Caldwell (2020) argues that online participants can engage in play-like activities without self-consciousness. This article argues that it is from the indulgence in play that some issues get misrepresented or exaggerated. The hype of texting happens effortlessly or rather unconsciously without much thinking or second thoughts reflecting the ritualistic engagement (Carey, 2009) in opposing or ridiculing adversaries. Citizens become susceptible to echo chambers or intergroups as they play in fellowship and commonality. Opposing Oppah Muchinguri’s reckless statement, a citizen tweeted:

They first thought COVID-19 was for the West as punishment for sanctions. Then they thought they are untouchable; they were never prepared for the rainy days.

It is evident that the misinformation during health crisis was a product of foul play or propaganda, to discredit others through fabricating conspiracies. Thus, social media in political contention become prone to fake news, disinformation, and misinformation as an effortless move by political opponents to discredit each other. This article notes that

the elements of disinformation or misinformation for the sake of discreditation are more prevalent in non-democratic settings with a historical context of political violence, witch hunts and prejudice (Douglas et al., 2019). For instance, a tweet by the Permanent Secretary of Information in Zimbabwe alluded that there were certain political players being eliminated in hospitals by political activists hiding behind medical qualifications. The accused political activists were termed “medical assassins” (@nickmangwana, 2021) as shown in tweets below:

This is what is leading to the unfortunate conspiracy theory that there are certain political players being eliminated in hospitals by political activists hiding behind medical qualifications. In fact, not just political players but medical assassins.

Not every doctor is a killer but killer doctors are not a strange phenomenon. I can give you a very long list in history which include serial killers and mass murderers. Do not take it personally if this boot does not fit, do not wear it.

The tweets were later deleted reflecting how media users become ritually involved in creating content that discredits other narratives without regard of their own actions. The tweets by the government official aroused opposition even by the medical fraternity as many tweeted in disbelief:

Nick, that is a serious allegation, hope you have evidence to this matter. Unlike your fellow comrades, we do not kill people but save lives regardless of any background. After all the risks we are taking, this is all what you are thinking. Very disappointed.

For a former nurse, Secretary Mangwana displays pedestrian thinking. He and his chums were openly violating COVID-19 rules as if they were special. They were holding useless meetings and parties. Now he is peddling conspiracy theories and looking for scapegoats among doctors and nurses.

Within the activity of discrediting other narratives in political contentions, media users use substantive statements or rather counterpoints. History has shown that the ZANU-PF-led government always blame the opposition or the West whenever confronted with the situation beyond their control. This article argues that blaming the opposition or the West, perhaps is a way of avoiding responsibility. We argue that play on social media does not necessarily reflect responsibility but indulgence for the sake of opposing or domineering to feed subjective gratifications. Given that social media as liberal digital public spheres are accessed by citizens and governments as stakeholders, the discourses reflected citizen protest, frustrations, and anger, on the contrary, as propaganda by government officials.

The COVID-19 impact exposed the social ills and the unhealthy relationship between the ruling regime and ordinary citizens. Laughter at the demise of the most powerful politicians mirrored the freedom to text or tweet whenever

excited about a situation. The excitement and inhuman behavior of laughter over death was appalling as it fed subjective gratifications. Some tweets below reflects inhuman culture:

Dear Zimbabweans, it is unAfrican to celebrate death. Let us mourn with those who have lost their loved ones.

In Britain a man was arrested and charged after a war hero called Sir Tom Moore died and he tweeted, “The only good Brit soldier is a dead one, burn auld fella.” In Zim, heroes die, people tweet celebrating, and nothing happens. We are doyens of democracy.

Ask yourself this simple question; why do people celebrate the death of your so-called “heroes?”

Is it African to kill, abduct, rape and jail opposition members when they have not committed any offense, simply because you want to continue looting?

In a nutshell, political participation during the COVID-19 pandemic reflected a polarized discursive community as shown by Mathe (2023) and Mathe and Caldwell (2017) that Zimbabwean discursive communities reverberate polarity of perspective. However, perspective can still be drawn regardless of conspiratorial satire, hyperbole and generalization.

## Conclusion

This article captures key issues on the quality of the digital public spheres in a non-democratic context. Through an analysis of tweets, the article demonstrates how the Twitter sphere was exploited for political protest during the COVID-19. Conspiratorial satire, misinformation, and exaggeration of political realities were common and the COVID-pandemic was used as an opportunity to scoff or laugh at the ruling regime from the experiences of human rights violations and corruption, poor health infrastructure, and political intolerance. In this activity of ridicule, which we view as an element of play, citizens could devise conspiracy theories and humor over the misfortunes that befell the ruling elites. Thus, Twitter displayed fragmented audiences for and against the ruling party or the opposition as they produced polarized content, which we criticize as less effective for political change. Habermas (1989) notes that public sphere may lack rational debates or quality information. We are of the perspective that content generated on Twitter during the COVID-19 was to a greater extent hyped through ridicule.

Perhaps ridicule, laughter, or play by the netizens during a crisis can be viewed from an angle of agonistic public spheres in which disgruntled voices can highlight poor governance, political intolerance, and corruption. The airing of perspective through laughter in the hyperbole, reflected a state of pitiable health infrastructure. Misinformation is often born out of efforts to discredit or credit political agendas. The article concludes that laughter feeds the gratifications of

the media user. Unlike Msimanga et al. (2022), this article does not view the use of satire as equipping the citizen with a “sense of power” but affords a sense of gratification for voicing out subjective crude facts.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### ORCID iD

Limukani Mathe  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6776-0683>

### Note

1. Gukurahundi is a genocide that occurred between 1985 and 1987 in Zimbabwe where more than 20,000 people were killed in a civil war.

### References

- Ajiboye, E. (2013). Ideological discourse analysis of the functions of feedback comments on online reports of sociopolitical crises in Nigeria. *Covenant Journal of Language Studies*, 1(2), 128–147.
- Banks, J. (2002). Gamers as co-creators: Enlisting the virtual audience—a report from the net face. In M. Balnaves, T. O’Regan, & J. Sternberg (Eds.), *Mobilising the audience* (pp. 188–212). University of Queensland Press.
- Burgess, J. (2006). Hearing ordinary voices: Cultural studies, vernacular creativity and digital storytelling. *Continuum*, 20(2), 201–214. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304310600641737>
- Caldwell, M. (2013). On the use of play theory in analyses of online public commentary. *Communicatio*, 39(4), 501–517. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02500167.2013.864449>
- Caldwell, M. (2020). Play theory. In: J. van Den Bulck (Ed.), *The international encyclopedia of media psychology* (pp. 1–12). Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119011071.iemp0259>
- Carey, J. (2009). *Communication as culture*. Routledge.
- Chari, T. (2010, October 11–12). Issue framing in Zimbabwe’s 2008 election: An analysis of two weekly newspaper. In *Paper presented at media and elections conference, wits institute for social research Johannesburg*. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/267270014>
- Chibuwe, A., & Munoriyarwa, A. (2022). Laughing through the virus the Zimbabwean way: WhatsApp humour and the twenty-one-day COVID-19 lockdown. *African Studies Review*, 65(2), 331–353. <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2022.20>
- Chuma, W. (2005). Zimbabwe: The media, market failure and political turbulence. *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies*, 26(1), 46–62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02560054.2005.9653318>
- Chuma, W. (2018). The politics of media policy making in a contested transition: The case of Zimbabwe’s government of national unity, 2009–2013. *International Journal of Communications*, 12, 2387–2405.
- Chuma, W., Msimanga, M. J., & Tshuma, L. A. (2020). Succession politics and factional journalism in Zimbabwe: A case of *The Chronicle in Zimbabwe*. *African Journalism Studies*, 41(1), 35–48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23743670.2020.1731564>
- Committee to Protect Journalists. (2008). Attacks on the press in 2008. <https://cpj.org/2009/02/attacks-on-the-press-in-2008-india/>
- Committee to Protect Journalists. (2022). Zimbabwean journalists assaulted, harassed, and blocked from covering events. <https://cpj.org/2022/10/zimbabwean-journalists-assaulted-harassed-and-blocked-from-covering-events>
- Dahlberg, L. (1998). Cyberspace and the public sphere: Exploring the democratic potential of the net. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 4(1), 70–84. <https://doi.org/10.1177/135485659800400108>
- Dahlberg, L. (2004). Net-public sphere research: Beyond the “first phase.” *Javnost—The Public*, 11(1), 27–43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2004.11008845>
- Demuyakor, J. (2021). The propaganda model in the digital age: A review of literature on the effects of social media on news production. *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, 8(4), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v8i4.3598>
- Douglas, K. M., Uscinski, J. E., Sutton, R. M., Cichocka, A., Nefes, T., Ang, C. S., & Deravi, F. (2019). Understanding conspiracy theories. *Political Psychology*, 40(S1), 3–35. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12568>
- Enders, A. M., Uscinski, J. E., Seelig, M. I., Klofstad, C. A., Wuchty, S., Funchion, J. R., Murthi, M. N., Premaratne, K., & Stoler, J. (2023). The relationship between social media use and beliefs in conspiracy theories and misinformation. *Political Behavior*, 45(2), 781–804. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-021-09734-6>
- Ferree, M. M., Gamson, W. A., Gerhards, J., & Rucht, D. (2002). Four models of the public sphere in modern democracies. *Theory and Society*, 31(3), 289–324. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1016284431021>
- Glasser, T. L. (2000). Play and the power of news. *Journalism*, 1(1), 23–29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146488490000100104>
- Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. MIT Press.
- Herman, E. S., & Chomsky, N. (1988). *Manufacturing consent: The political economy of the mass media*. Pantheon Books.
- Hindman, M. (2009). *The myth of digital democracy*. Princeton University Press.
- Jamieson, K. H., & Albarracín, D. (2020). The relation between media consumption and misinformation at the outset of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic in the US. *The Harvard Kennedy School Misinformationreview*, 1(2), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-012>
- Linstead, S. (1988). Jokers wild: Humor in organisational culture. In Powell & G. E. C. Paton (Eds.), *Humor in society: Resistance and Control* (pp. 123–148). Macmillan Publishers.
- Mathe, L. (2017). A network analysis of conversational news readers on political and economic Zimbabwe online media. *Journal of Communication*, 8(1), 44–55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0976691X.2017.1312173>
- Mathe, L. (2018). *The framing of news: A comparative content analysis of the state-controlled and privately owned print media coverage on political news in Zimbabwe* [Doctoral

- Thesis, University of Fort Hare, Alice, South Africa]. [https://books.google.co.za/books/about/The\\_Framing\\_of\\_News.html?id=nTFezgEACAAJ&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.co.za/books/about/The_Framing_of_News.html?id=nTFezgEACAAJ&redir_esc=y)
- Mathe, L. (2020a). The challenges and opportunities of a Web 2.0 election: The case of Zimbabwe. *Journal of African Elections*, 19(2), 125–145. <https://doi.org/10.20940/JAE/2020/v19i2a7>
- Mathe, L. (2020b). Political Discourses on race and social inequalities through social media and live parliamentary debates in South Africa: A content analysis. *Communicare: Journal for Communication Studies in Africa*, 39(2), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.36615/jcsa.v39i2.1518>
- Mathe, L. (2020c). Rethinking ethical journalism in the worsening socio-economic and political crisis in Zimbabwe. *Communicatio*, 46(2), 20–43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02500167.2020.1812682>
- Mathe, L. (2023). Women's political participation in Zimbabwe: Play and content creation on Twitter. *Information, Communication and Society*, 26(13), 2598–2613. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2023.2250442>
- Mathe, L., & Caldwell, M. (2017). A content analysis of readers' comments on political and economic news articles from Zimbabwe online media. *Journal of Communication*, 8(1), 56–68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0976691X.2017.1305684>
- Mathe, L., & Motsaathebe, G. (2022). Discursive communities, protest, xenophobia, and looting in South Africa: A social network analysis. *Communicatio*, 48(1), 102–126. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02500167.2022.2083204>
- Mathe, L., & Motsaathebe, G. (2023). African multilingual public sphere: A critical analysis of minority indigenous language(s) representation on Breeze FM talk radio in Zimbabwe. *African Identities*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2023.2251700>
- Mathe, L., & Osunkunle, O. (2019). Readers' perspectives: Examining the influence of political. *Communitas*, 24, 1–15.
- Matsilele, T. (2019). *Social media dissidence in Zimbabwe* [PhD dissertation]. University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- Matsilele, T. (2022). *Social media and digital dissidence in Zimbabwe*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-08403-4>
- Matsilele, T., & Ruhanya, P. (2021). Social media dissidence and activist resistance in Zimbabwe. *Media, Culture and Society*, 43(2), 381–394. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720957886>
- McChesney, R. W. (1999). *Rich media, poor democracy*. University of Illinois Press.
- Mouffe, C. (1999). Deliberative democracy or agonistic pluralism? *Social Research*, 66(3), 745–758.
- Mpofu, S. (2021a). *Digital humour in the Covid-19 pandemic: Perspectives from the global south*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mpofu, S. (2021b). Ridicule and humour in the global south: Theorizing politics of laughter in the social media age. In S. Mpofu (Ed.), *The politics of laughter in the social media age: Perspectives from the global south* (pp. 1–19). Springer.
- Msimanga, M. J., Tshuma, L. A., & Matsilele, T. (2022). The why of humour during a crisis: An exploration of COVID-19 memes in South Africa and Zimbabwe. *Journal of African Media Studies*, 14(2), 189–207. [https://doi.org/10.1386/jams\\_00073\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/jams_00073_1)
- Mugari, Z. E. (2008). *Ambivalence and activism: Towards a typology of the interrogating the form and content of refracted public realms in polarised societies: How have the media performed in the run-up to Zimbabwe's 2008 national elections*. Codesria.
- Mutsvairo, B., & Karam, B. (2018). *Perspectives on political communication in Africa*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ndlovu, M. (2021). Humour in the time of COVID-19 pandemic: A critical analysis of the subversive meanings of WhatsApp memes in Zimbabwe. In S. Mpofu (Ed.), *Digital humour in the Covid-19 pandemic* (pp. 259–277). Springer.
- Nieman Reports. (2000). <https://niemanreports.org/articles/imprisonment-and-torture-of-journalists-in-zimbabwe/>
- Oates, S. (2008). *An introduction to media and politics*. Sage.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2002). The virtual sphere: The internet as a public sphere. *New Media and Society*, 4(1), 9–27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614440222226244>
- Papacharissi, Z. (2010). *A private sphere: Democracy in a digital age*. Polity Press.
- Pariser, E. (2011). *The filter bubble: What the Internet is hiding from you*. Penguin Books.
- Pedro-Carañana, J., Broudy, D., & Klaehn, J. (2018). Introduction. In J. P. Carañana, D. Broudy, & J. Klaehn (Eds.), *The propaganda model today: Filtering perception and awareness* (pp. 1–18). University of Westminster Press.
- Raftopoulos, B. (2002). Briefing: Zimbabwe's 2002 presidential election. *African Affairs*, 101(404), 413–426. <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/101.404.413>
- Schäfer, M. S. (2015). Digital public sphere. In G. Mazzoleni, K. G. Barnhurst, K. Ikeda, R. C. M. Maia, & H. Wessler (Eds.), *The international encyclopedia of political communication* (pp. 322–328). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Scheufele, D. A., & Nisbet, M. C. (2002). Being a citizen online: New opportunities and dead ends. *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 7(3), 55–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/108118002129172638>
- Shirky, C. (2011). The political power of social media: Technology, the public sphere, and political change. *Foreign Affairs*, 90(1), 28–41.
- Shulman, S. W. (2009). The case against mass e-mails: Perverse incentives and low-quality public participation in US. Federal rulemaking. *Policy and Internet*, 1(1), 23–53. <https://doi.org/10.2202/1944-2866.1010>
- Stephenson, W. (1967). *The play theory of mass communication*. Transaction Publishers.
- Stephenson, W. (1988). *The play theory of mass communication*. Transaction Publishers.
- Sunstein, C. R. (2017). Default rules are better than active choosing (often). *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 21(8), 600–606. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2017.05.003>
- Sylvester, C. (1990). Unities and disunities in Zimbabwe's 1990 election. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 28(3), 375–400. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X00054616>
- Tshuma, L. A., Msimanga, M. J., & Tshuma, B. B. (2022). Laughing through the stomach: Satire, humour and advertising in sub-Saharan Africa. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096221123746>
- Volan, K. (2005). *Zimbabwe: Parliamentary elections March 2005* [NORDEM report]. The Norwegian Centre of Human Rights, Norderm University of Oslo.

- Wessler, H. (2008). Investigating deliberativeness comparatively. *Political Communication*, 25(1), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600701807752>
- Woolgar, S. (2002). Five rules of virtuality. In R. Cyberbole & S. Woolgar (Eds.), *Virtual society? Technology* (pp. 1–22). Oxford University Press.

### Author Biographies

**Limukani Mathe** (PhD, University of Fort Hare) is a Lecturer and Research Fellow attached to the Entity of Indigenous Language Media in Africa (ILMA) at the University of North-West in South

Africa. Previously, he was a Lecturer and Research Fellow in the Department of Communication and Media at the University of Johannesburg. His research interests are at the intersection of democracy and digital technologies with particular focus on web-based communities (commentary forums, social media, news sites), indigenous language media and journalism practices in the Global South.

**Gilbert Motsaathebe** (PhD, University of Witwatersrand) is an NRF rated Research Professor attached to the Entity of Indigenous Language Media in Africa (ILMA) at the University of North-West in South Africa.