ICTs and Political Activism - a Zimbabwean experience

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Activists generally find themselves up against the better resourced machinery of governments or large corporations. To contend, they have to access a combination of passion, charisma, networks and smart tools.

In the late 90s in Zimbabwe,civil society activists began to co-operate with each other to mobilise the public in a battle for democracy and renewal. Momentum started to gather as social and economic factors in the country drove disparate interests together to form a movement for change.

Over the next 12+ years, the government rolled out a raft of legislative reform to constrain the media space, restrict public gatherings, limit political organising and criminalise protest. The rule of law was dramatically compromised with the politicisation of the police, army and judiciary; all pretence of a separation of powers discarded.

Violence, propaganda and the restriction of free movement and public gathering quickly became the norm after the constitutional reform referendum in 1998. All forms of journalism were regulated via legislation that required journalists and their publishing vehicles to be licensed by a government body with a very narrow and partisan remit.

To counter the government's tight grip over the traditional media, activists integrated old fashioned tactics of leaflets, graffiti, and small covert meetings with electronic media: short wave radio, pocket sized video cameras, digital cameras, fax machines, the Internet and email. These tools enabled them to efficiently share the horror of the violence, mobilise private resources and motivate communities to co-operate to push back against the government – locally, regionally and internationally. To counter the insecurity inherent in using electronic media, IT savvy individuals and organisations learnt how to use encryption to improve the security of their electronic communications and data storage.

In spite of the extremely difficult operating environment for traditional media, information about the conditions pertaining inside the country was steadily reaching the outside world. Amateur video clips were regularly making it out to be broadcast on major TV networks like BBC, CNN, ABC and Al Jazeera. Web sites, blogs and email mailing lists were commonly used to keep people up-to-date.

An early adopter of this mix of ICTs was Kubatana.net, a locally based non-profit which became an important aggregator of civic and human rights information on Zimbabwe. Its free online archive, established in 2001, offered articles, reports, documents and interviews with much of the information sourced from local civic organisations and international watch dogs. Its electronic NGO directory made civil society organisations accessible at a time when contact details were extremely fluid. Its email newsletter mailing list kept thousands of ordinary Zimbabweans regularly informed of events, opportunities and newly added resources to the web site. And its early adoption of SMS proved crucial to keeping Zimbabweans informed during the critical 2008 elections.

However, a serious challenge remained for the dissemination of information locally, especially to poorer, offline communities. Given the economic conditions inside the country and the growing unemployment, access to information via email and the Internet was expensive for the ordinary person – urban and rural. For the very poor, these information channels were completely inaccessible because of the lack of access to computers. The circulation figures for the few remaining independent print publications shrank dramatically as the cost of production rocketed with inflation, distribution was curtailed by militia and readers could no longer afford to buy their

own copies.

Activists had to turn to efficient, low-cost media to circulate information. Kubatana worked effectively to aggregate and circulate non-partisan civil society information inside the country using a combination of ICTs and traditional tools. Materials in the form of videos, reports, CDs and DVDs were publicised via email and then posted free of charge to recipients. These products included interviews with survivors of political violence, reports on the humanitarian situation inside the country, legislation, opinion etc. Kubatana started 'electronic activism' campaigns, urging readers to get involved in direct action around egregious issues. They also encouraged better resourced individuals and organisations to forward information on into less privileged communities by printing information they had received via email and including it with newspaper cuttings in envelopes to be mailed out to rural areas. Not only did this increase the knowledge of Zimbabweans on the margins, but it also brought together groups of people in urban areas who could collaborate to make a difference in the political landscape. This kind of initiative helped people feel more empowered and engaged.

Details of meetings were widely and consistently advertised by Kubatana using all of its information channels, increasing participation and awareness of events inside the country. Copies of free civil society materials, legislation, legal advice and opinion were distributed broadly across the country. In time the organisation's regular email newsletter came to be recognised not only as a source of news and free materials, but also of inspiration, activism, jobs and opportunities. This integration of materials accelerated the growth of the mailing list, creating a wide ranging audience of locals, diplomats, journalists, academics, students, activists, politicians, diasporans and media.

For a considerable part of this time mobile phone networks were restricted in the growth of their coverage, penetration and operation by government licensing and regulation. Sim cards were expensive and generally had to be procured on the black market. The use of SMS as a means of organising and communicating slowly grew in importance as business interests began to challenge government restrictions. Through SMS a broad cross section of members of the public began to share their opinion, aspirations and experience with Kubatana. Periodic SMS updates helped to make them feel a part of the broader information landscape. During the 2008 elections Kubatana's SMS service was one of the very few information initiatives keeping Zimbabweans appraised of the election results as government restricted real time access to this information.

After 5 years of predominantly publishing other peoples voices and opinions, Kubatana decided to start a blog in 2006 to raise its own voice and that of other local individuals - www.kubatanablogs.net/kubatana. Amongst other things, the blog was used to share feedback received via SMS from local Zimbabweans with Kubatana's broad web audience. This combination of new media gave a diverse audience a first hand appreciation of what offline communities in Zimbabwe were experiencing.

As general access to mobile phone services grew in Zimbabwe, Kubatana started to investigate the potential for delivering audio materials as well as SMS based information across the mobile networks. Frustrated by the inherent limitations of 160 characters for SMS messages, the organisation was keen to exploit the potential of Interactive Voice Response (IVR) audio menus to share information in more detail with phone users. The cheapest way to share audio information is obviously to broadcast via radio. However, in Zimbabwe there are no licensed community radio stations and government controls all public radio and television channels. Under these circumstances it made sense to experiment with short audio clips embedded in automated voice menus..Press 1 for todays news headlines, Press 2 to listen to an excerpt from an interview with ...

At the time, in 2005, there didn't seem to be a cheap, easy to use tool with which to create this kind

of service. So Kubatana sourced funding and set about developing a free open source telephony software platform with the features we considered important. Voice menus for short audio files; voice mail for callers to share their experience, observations and questions; basic SMS receiving, and SMS polls for quick surveys. We call the software Freedom Fone. Importantly, the platform has been developed to be independent of the Internet - an important feature given the cost and unreliability of Internet connectivity in many developing countries. Instead it depends on the fast growing mobile (GSM) networks that have become ubiquitous around the world.

Testament to the power of ICTs is the fact that Kubatana's full-time staff never grew to more than 5 people – and yet was able to deliver this much information and innovation throughout one of Zimbabwe's most difficult decades in recent times.