Platform Activism and the Mediation of Electoral Process in Semi-Authoritarian Regimes: A Zimbabwean case study.

Abstract

This study examines Zimbabwe's 2023 harmonised elections within the context of digital platforms mediation. In authoritarian regimes with tightly controlled information flow, social media becomes a crucial space for political discourse and challenging hegemonic narratives. Using data mined from X, formerly Twitter, during August 2023, this paper analyses how digital activists framed and discussed the electoral process, focusing on key discourses, influential actors, and activist media platforms. The research explores the intersection of platformisation and digital activism. The study also examines the emergence of "platform journalism" and its role in disseminating election-related information. By constructing an electoral crisis narrative, digital activists challenged the credibility of the elections and called for fresh polls. Findings reveal that X users critically scrutinised the electoral process, exposing alleged malpractices and voter intimidation. This paper contributes to understanding the evolving nature of political communication and activism in semi-authoritarian regimes, demonstrating how social media platforms enable citizens to reclaim their political agency and challenge state narratives in contexts of restricted traditional media freedom.

Keywords: Platforms, Platform Activism, Platform Journalism, Elections, Zimbabwe

Introduction

The past few years have witnessed a surge in power transfer following military coups, predominantly in West and Central Africa: Gabon, Niger, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Chad

and Mali, all within a three-year window, 2020-2023. One of the proffered reasons for the fleeting celebration of coups is of the waning faith in liberal democracy, electoral politics and electoral processes often accused of producing ‘predetermined outcomes.’ The failure of liberal democracy to deliver a more just society has seen citizens moving online to protest what is largely believed to be failure of the promises of democracy.

Social media offers a place where citizens can gather and protest governments’ failures. This networked ‘gathering’ is what we conceptualise for this study as networked activism which is more pronounced in authoritarian regimes where information is tightly controlled by the state, within such context social media platforms have become an important space and sites for mediating political discourses and challenging hegemonic views often privileged in state controlled public media. The role of social media in political activism is well documented (Obia 2023; Matsilele 2022; Boczkowski & Papacharissi, 2018; Matsilele & Mutsvairo 2021) with most studies observing that due to the shrinking democratic space and failure to promote pluralism, most networked citizens, especially in autocratic states like Zimbabwe, are moving online to register discontent.

In Zimbabwe, the focus of this study, elections have turned from being the contestation of ideas to a ‘battle ground’ or ‘war zone.’ Since 1980, Zimbabwean elections have largely been bloody and marked by irregularities, intimidation, violence and murder (see Kriger 2005; Sithole & Makumbe 1997; Moyo 1992; Ruhanya & Gumbo 2023; Matsilele 2013). Through the continuation of the ‘Gukurahundi policy’[1], “an undisguised, intolerant, commandist, and deliberately violent policy towards the opposition” (Sithole & Makumbe 1997, 133), the ruling ZANU-PF goes for the jugular and pulls out all the dirty tricks to win power. In the process, the state turns against the citizens it is supposed to protect

(Sachikonye 2011; Muzondidya 2009). This approach by the state, especially during the electoral season has been theorised by Ranger (2017) where citizens are turned into traitors or what Matsilele's (2022) study describes as 'dissidents' who are dispensable or can be expunged as if they were cancer.

Media spaces are closed with the state having tight control over the information flow. The Reporters Without Borders (RSF 2023) report observed that while the media situation in Zimbabwe had improved slightly since the fall of former dictator Robert Mugabe in 2017 with access to information having increased and self-censorship on decline, the media have been subjected to more persecution since President Emmerson Mnangagwa's reelection in 2023. This is not surprising when one considers some of the most punitive pieces of legislation to be passed in Zimbabwe have come under the Mnangagwa regime such as the Patriot Act meant to silence any form of criticism of Zanu-PF elites by citizens, especially to foreigners. As RSF (2023) also noted, the amended penal code and Official Secrets Act, and the new Cyber Security and Data Protection Act continue to hamstring journalism. For this reason, social media platforms have been the safeties and best spaces where people have been taking the government into account.

Digital amateurs have been at the forefront in mediating the electoral process, something which the mainstream media has failed to do. Taking from the role of amateur in theatre (Msimanga 2020; Ridout 2003), the amateur actor is the "one that can pose those naïve questions that are never heard in parliament or asked by professional politicians' (Milohnic 2005, 7). These amateur actors form part of the 'non-movements' which are developed by people who have no political affiliation or established political structures but their actions and performances are shared by "large numbers of ordinary people whose

fragmented but similar activities trigger much social change, even though these practices are rarely guided by an ideology or recognizable leadership and organization" (Bayat 2010, 14). Gramsci (1999 [1971]) describes these informal unions or discussions as black parliamenterism that takes the place of normal or real parliament. Black parliament is thus an 'implicit,' unofficial, and extra-legal forum for the political expression of various forces and tendencies in any society" (Saccarelli 2008, 81).

Building on these arguments, this paper examines the mediation of the electoral process in Zimbabwe by digital activists. The focus will be the August 2023 harmonised elections. One of the things that makes these elections worthy of an 'ink' of this paper is that despite numerous controversies around Zimbabwe's elections in the past, the 2023 were the first to be condemned by the SADC and African Union blocks. The elections were found to have lacked credibility and transparency. In this paper, we acknowledge studies that have been done looking at electoral practices in Zimbabwe and beyond (Zvayi 2006; Sithole and Makumbe 1997), with the majority of these being structural in nature, that is, looking for the best practices and shortcomings surrounding the country's elections (Lifongo et al, 2023; Sibe and Kaunert 2023). However, the centrality of the citizens or the 'black parliament' in mediating such a crucial process remains scarce.

Second, the paper focuses on the nexus between platforms and digital activism. Gillespie (2010, 351) notes that "platforms not necessarily because they allow code to be written or run, but because they afford an opportunity to communicate, interact and sell." In this era where social media users can monetise their content, platforms are sites where content performs two functions, that is, to communicate information, and sell. One way in which information sells, for sites like X, is for it to be popular. Thus, digital activism has

had a new layer of meaning and form, which is commerce. One of the most important elements that powers both activism and commerce is programmability which is the process where content becomes popular across social media platforms (Heldmend 2015). Hutchinson (2012, 39) further adds it is the manipulation of content that is distributed across social media platforms that promotes our interpersonal communicative activities. In this paper, we demonstrate how platformisation has also permeated the news sites who have since embarked on platform journalism where the former has made investment on programmability to grow their followers and popularise their site and content. While we understand that a lot of work has been done on platformisation of content, most of it has been coming from the global North (Hutchison 2021; Helmond 2015; Gillespie 2010), and we argue that the form, character, and nature of platform content cannot be the same owing to different political climates. For example, internet shutdown has been a key feature in sub-Saharan Africa semi-authoritarian regimes like Zimbabwe, and Uganda (Marchant and Stremlau 2020). Hence, despite understanding the nature of activists in the era of platformisation of content, it is at the heart of this paper to map the scope of platform activism in non-western communities, especially semi-authoritarian regimes which have been working overdrive to have their presence felt and known online.

Platforms and political activism

The growth in the use of digital technologies has seen oppressed citizens having the space to challenge the authoritarian regimes from the margins. This is not without critique with some scholars on platformisation such as García-Marzá and Calvo (2024) arguing

that one of the challenges that comes with rapid platformisation is that big data and metadata have become a double-edged sword for the digitally hyperconnected democratic society. There have been debates on the influence of platforms in activism (Özkula, 2021) but the general agreement has been that these platforms play a crucial role in fostering the collective which is key in political activism (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Zeng, 2020). Most of these platforms have the benefit of mixing both words and videos, making them have an edge in communication. Within the rubric of political activism, hashtag activism has been popular among social movements. Hashtag activism refers to the online movement where large numbers of postings appear under a common hashtag with a social or political claim (Yang, 2016).

The culture of sharing that usually comes with the use of X leads to 'collective action' or 'call to action' (Barzilai-Nahom and Hemsley 2013). More so, the previously seen as "passive gated" columns are now gatekeepers with much impact and influence through broadcasting information (Meraz and Papacharissi 2013, 5). In the era of platforms, "platformisation represents how data, which is content and its user engagement, can be used in a number of other unforeseen ways to connect content producers to content consumers" (Hutchinson 2021, 39). Hence, powered by algorithms, information circulates on social media like veld fire through sharing and retweeting, for X. The centrality of software which powers social media spaces in "shaping participation and sociality" (Gillespie 2010, 348).

Activism on X is critical due to the affordance that comes with the platform which includes interactivity and visuality (Hase et al., 2023). Of interest to this study, and underdeveloped discourse on platform activism in non-western societies is 'algorithmic curation' where

audiences receive messages tailored for them leading to the virility of the information and more interaction. Protest cultures or forms of digital activism form part of 'platform logic' which can be explained as the routines, strategies and mechanisms, and economies of given platforms (Hase et al., 2023; van Dijck and Poell 2013). In this paper, our focus is on X logic as logic vary from one platform to another while some overlap.

In Zimbabwe, the advent of Facebook and X (formerly Twitter), suppressed voices used the virtual spaces to protest the governments with some of the notable examples being #ThisFlag movement, #ZimbabweLivesMatter (Msimanga et al. 2022), Baba Jukwa activism (see Matsilele 2022). One of the major writings on digital activism and elections in the country has focused on political engagement between the ruling and opposition political parties (Tshuma et al 2022). The engagements mirror the Zimbabwe 'toxic' political environment, and the online discussions end up being dominated by trolls from the either side (Chitanana 2020). Given the history of bloody electoral processes in Zimbabwe, platforms like Twitter and Facebook have been useful in giving voice to the voiceless, especially tackling topics that cannot be said in offline spaces.

The growth in the use of X resulted in hashtag activism which has proven to be useful in creating awareness and forging virtual communities. While the success of these movements remains debatable, hashtag activism has on many occasions been useful bringing to light human rights abuses by the nation as has been the case with #ENDSARS (Obia 2023.), #eSwatiniLivesMatter (Matsilele et al. 2021). The affordances of social media platforms have been found to have facilitated increasing "ideological silos" and

“echo chambers” (Ott, 2017). These have been mainly seen through hashtag movements which have also amplified the “Twitter Agenda ", for twitter (now X) users, that strongly differed from the media agenda (Guo and Liu, 2022). In this discourse, there is the influence of opinion leaders or influencers who influence social media engagements. Some of these influencers are the originators of the information, and also spread the information faster and widespread since they command a huge following (Starbird & Palen, 2012). On electoral process, and during moment of a crisis, platforms have been a common place for framing the crisis, and breaking the news results showed an important number of retweets and links, described by the authors as “gate watching und news-sharing activities” (Bruns & Stieglitz 2012, 176).

Connective and Collective Action Theory

This study employs a framework that integrates both collective and connective action theories. Collective action theory posits that rational social actors continuously evaluate the behaviors of others to inform their own decisions regarding cooperation. This process increasingly shapes behavior and action within networked spaces. Connective action theory, as Mirbabaie et al. (2021, 25) explain, is "based more on the use of information technologies and engaged in digitally networked action, which leads to weaker ties in the network of participants." The concept of weak ties was theorised by Malcolm Gladwell (2010) in his seminal work called Small Change where he argues that online networks had little effects to what happens in the offline world due to weak ties. In the contemporary digital landscape, social media platforms serve as affordances that both connect

disparate individuals and mobilise collective action. This dual function is supported by Diani's (2011, 226) observation that in social movements, even those with loose ties, "coordination takes place through informal networks between formally independent actors, who all identify nonetheless – if with variable intensity – with a common cause." Expanding on this concept, Vaast et al. (2017, 1183) argue that "the use of social media (and, in particular for this paper, microblogging) enables a distinct interdependence type among the emerging roles of actors engaging in connective action." This interdependence is further reinforced by the self-motivating nature of participation in digitally mediated social networks. As Mirbabaie et al. (2021, 25) aptly note, "participation in digitally mediated social networks becomes self-motivating, because self-produced content is shared with others and recognized by them. In turn, others will repeat these sharing activities." This theoretical framework provides a robust foundation for analysing the complex dynamics of social media activism, particularly in the context of electoral processes in semi-authoritarian regimes. It allows for a nuanced understanding of how digital platforms facilitate both individual connections and collective mobilisation, often simultaneously and in ways that challenge traditional power structures. Four key aspects define the theory, and these are: commenting (Harlow and Harp 2012), relaying information received (Juris 2012), uploading materials (Lim 2012), and liking, following, sharing (Segnerberg & Bennest 2011) what Matsilele and Nkoala (2023) characterised as metavoicing. These key aspects are also central in the platformisation of content as the power of algorithms is at play ‘suggesting’ information worth the readers’ eye and thus prompting the person to be part of the conversation or engagements.

Methodological consideration

The study analysed X posts on Zimbabwe's elections that were held on the 23rd of August 2023. Discussions around Zimbabwe's elections were centered around the hashtag #ZimbabweDecides and #ZimElections. Our study mined data using Python software for the month of August. We chose the month of August because that's when the political temperatures surged, and more content was generated. This qualitative study's aim was to look at key discourses that were produced on X, and the broader aspect of 'platform activism. One of the biggest advantages of using Python is that it allowed us to understand the key discourses which were propagated by social media users. Second, it enabled us to capture the key players or influencers, those individuals, who had a large following or popularity. Third, it also allowed us to get the popular news platforms that were dominant during the period of analysis, and in this case being the electoral period. Closely tied to the aspect of plaformisation of content, the software enabled us to understand the influence of 'platform culture' on X as it related to sharing, retweets, and likes. Such metrics enabled us to understand the message which attracted more traffic. For this reason, we deployed thematic analysis to make sense of the qualitative data. According to Braun and Clark (2009, 2), thematic analysis is "a method of identifying, analysing and reporting patterns and themes within data." Thematic analysis can be sematic and latent. The former involves detecting themes at "the surface or semantic appearance" and the researcher will not be looking for anything beyond what is captured by the text (Boyatzis, 1998; Bryman, 2001). The latter requires going from description to a deeper meaning of what the data is all about, and it through this theory that can be developed based on patterns that might have emerged (Braun & Clarke 2006). Braun and Clark (2009,13) further note that this method, "tends to provide less a rich description of

the data overall, and more a detailed analysis of some aspect of the data." In doing thematic analysis, we followed six key stages. We first familiarized ourselves with the mined as indicated by Javadi and Zarea (2016, 33) who notes that "in order to find out the content depth, the immersion of the researcher in the data is necessary." As such, I had to repeatedly go through the transcripts so that I become more familiar with information. After this we went on to develop codes to help come up with key characteristics of the data. The next stage was to closely look at codes with the aim of identifying patterns that were emerging. After that, we reviewed the themes. At this stage, we looked at the themes that were coming out of the data. Braun and Clark (2009) notes that this stage involves extracting powerful quotes or examples that speak to chosen themes. The next section discusses the study's key findings, which are structured under three themes:

- Social Media and Discourses on Zimbabwe's 2023 Elections
- Platform Journalism and Electoral Processes
- Constructing an Electoral Crisis

Social Media and Discourses on Zimbabwe's 2023 Elections

In mapping the use of X during Zimbabwe's 2023 elections, recurring electoral issues or concerns like voter intimidation, biased electoral body, violation of the constitution, and lack of independence by the state become popular once again. This demonstrated that the country's democracy hasn't matured since independence, instead, electoral

malpractices are being entrenched on each electoral cycle (see Kwashirai 2023; Matsilele 2022). In this study, the data reveals that X became a platform where the state became under scrutiny for suppressing people's will. Electoral violence has been common in all the country's election since 1980, the involvement of security forces in political affairs of the country constitute what Sithole and Makumbe (1997, 133) call Gukurahundi policy which is the "an undisguised, intolerant, commandist, and deliberately violent policy towards the opposition." In the August 2023 elections, X users gave ´evidence´ by condemning ZANU-PF for once again colluding with the dreaded Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) to deploy its shadowy affiliate organisation, Forever Associates Zimbabwe (FAZ), to intimidate voters on election day. It seems the party came with a different strategy as its elections are usually run by the military which has been dominating the structure of the electoral body. Thus, the harmonised elections were framed as lacking credibility and fairness as voters, especially from rural areas, were intimidated to vote for the ruling ZANU-PF party.

With state sponsored surveillance being pervasive in Zimbabwe, it can be argued that the social media has also powered citizens to perform ´electoral surveillance´ on the state. For example, @freemanchari through his parallel tabulation said:

> I was hoping that by now @ZECzim wld (would) have released a spreadsheet with their votes per polling station. First things first, we believe Zec plucked numbers out of thin air. This is how our parallel tabulation looks as of now. We have feeding V11s into the system.

To add more, Masunungure (2011, 51) had earlier argued that “most Zimbabweans have come to view themselves as subjects not citizens which has a major implication for political behaviour.” As subjects, people toe the line without those in power while citizens have the civic duty and right to call those in power to order. However, social media has given social media users power to reclaim their citizenship and challenge the state and act of electoral fraud as seen by the expose by @freemanchari. The deployment of digital connective action in this case demonstrated the agency networked citizens are reclaiming from the state to challenge anti-democratic tendencies and exposing the crude use and abuse of state apparatus for power retention purposes. The networked acts of monitoring state actors’ behaviors by independent networked citizens have, in some instances, forced some state apparatus to retreat on manipulating outcomes (Matsilele & Mboti 2022).

Table 1: Frame Codebook

Twitter Frame:	Description:	Example of Tweets:

ZEC	ZEC lacks independence and ran a worst and shambolic election in Zimbabwean history. The electoral commission continue to be seen as an extension of the ruling ZANU-PF party.	@freemanchari: I was hoping that by now @ZECzim wld have realised a spread with their votes per polling station. First things first, we believe Zec plucked numbers out of thin air. This is how our parallel tabulation looks like as of now. We have feeding V11s into the system. Final voter's roll has never been availed to ALL the 5 presidential elections that have been held in Zimbabwe since 2000. In 2008, ZEC never released the final version. In 2023, refused to make this public. SADC and AU must now take over. #FreshElection @African Union
SADC	SADC condemned Zim's elections and this this makes the election invalid and not credible	

ZANU-PF/ Mnangagwa	The election was a farce which was coupled by intimidation.	The re-election of Zimbabwe president was marred voter suppression, arrest of observers, voter intimidation, threats of violence, harassment and coercion. The credibility of this election is in grave doubt. We must stand with opposition like @advocate mahere.
	Emmerson Mnangagwa and his ZANU-PF are framed as having captured the court.	@ali-naka- a judge who tenure was unconstitutionally extended cannot be expected to be an unbiased adjudicator more so after accepting a $400 000 bribe from the incumbent. You all know what needs to happen but you are not prepared for it. You want someone to do for you always!
CCC/CHAMISA.	Chamisa has won an election, and is the popular candidate. CCC is seen as being targeted and rigged out of power	

The table above (Fig 1) shows some of the key discourses that were produced on X. What is striking is that the ruling ZANU-PF and the electoral commission were framed as Siamese twins who work together to hatch an electoral victory at the expense of other competing parties. Tapping from the Connective-Collective theory, while platforms provide means and ways of connecting with each other through various means like liking and reposting (Segerbeg & Bennest 2011), the influence one has on these platforms is also key on the virality of information. Boyd (2010, 46) notes that "networked publics introduce new affordances for amplifying, recording and spreading information and social act." In this paper, hashtags were used to engage and popularise the issue at hand. Second, contextual messages were shared to give more depth to the content. Castells (2013) further reminds us that these publics have creative ways and means to mobilise people on social media spaces. One of the key takeaways from the above discussion is the collective and connective aspect that is central in platforms. The influence one commands on these platforms has a large bearing on the collective and connective engagements which, in some cases, has led to the growth of social media influencers (Benkler 2006). The popularity of an issue within a given community is picked up by algorithms who, for example, on X, indicate the trending topics to individuals thus further influencing engagements on platforms. However, as argued by Mirbabaie et al. (2021, 25) the deployment of networked connective action can have a muted impact due to existing weak ties. This might mean that beyond social media engagements, this connective action might fail to result into offline changes.

Platform Journalism and Electoral Processes

The Zimbabwean government has since 1980 treated elections as a matter of life and death with the media being one of the victims of the government crackdown on its critics. Platforms have been playing a critical role in journalism practices leading to the platformatisation of content. Helmend (2015, 1) defines platformisation as "the rise of platform as the dominant infrastructural and economic model of social web and its consequences." The growth in the use of social media platforms has empowered the growth of 'dissident media' which is operating on various social media platforms, leading scholars to call it platform journalism. Yin et al., (2023, 1) define platform journalism as "a new form of journalism which employs the social media platform as the space of new production." These platforms are informed by 'programmability' where content becomes popular across social media platforms. Through platform journalism, the one-way form of communication is replaced by two-way as participants which include journalists, social media users can engage each other on a range of issues. More so, users set the agenda and thus influence journalistic work. News in journalism is no longer only determined by news values but by what the audience likes or is of concern to them. In the Zimbabwean elections, data shows that citizens gave 'evidence' and 'engaged' on electoral practices with these news organisations on X. One of the popular discourses on Zimbabwean elections is voter intimidation and ballot stuffing. On voting days, 23 and 24 August, @citezw became one of the most popular news organisations that dominated the virtual sphere on X. Through the platformisation of content, social media sites no longer work in isolation. For @citezw, users were commenting on either their videos on YouTube, and

also their news websites using their X accounts. Such, their content became popular on X. In one of their messages, they showed the voter malpractices where voters were asked to first register their names with members suspected of being ZANU-PF officials. The message read:

> #Masvingo. A car is stationed at house number 7411 Chiteza Street, Rujeko B less than 300 metres from the Rujeko Ward 7 Masvingo urban polling station. They also have a ZEC voter's roll and are ticking names of those who have voted. #Asakhe #ElectionsZW #ZimElection2023

The above message received 381 likes and 328 retweets. These practices make the news or information go viral and thus enabling different players to either act or join in spreading the news. In this process, connections are made between news organisations and platform publishers leading to the creation of the "meso-news space" (Tenenboim & Kligler-Vilenchik 2020). The "meso—news space" is "an online space located between the private and public realms, where a group of people are involved in news-related processes (Tenenboim & Keleligler-Vilenchik 2020, 2). In this case, citizens were involved in providing evidence related to election malpractices which were then taken up by these news outlets and published as news. For example, PacheduZw hailed polling agents who had stopped officials from allowing people who were not on voter's roll to cast their votes. The message that had 4813 lives and 1064 read: "THESE HILLER RD AGENTS ARE THE MVPs!!! Thank you, champions!!! #DefendTheVotezw". This breakthrough intervention by the networked citizens demonstrates the power of connective and collective action where citizens share crucial information to help expose electoral malfeasance. This is consistent with observations by Bennett and Segerberg (2012) who

argue that social media allows empowered networked individuals to co-produce and co-distribute content, coordinate through individualised yet connected contributions, and leverage a new and growing action repertoire enabled by social media. In the Zimbabwean case, citizens were able to produce, coordinate and distribute content that exposed attempts to manipulate elections.

Table 3: Popular Platforms on Voting Days

Using likes and retweets, even in stories that did not originate from the news organisations, these platform publishers are indirectly involved in the news making process. Thus, due to platform journalism, social media users and the news industry have increasingly been married together. With citizens engaging in what Matsilele (2022) described as “dissidence”, it can also be argued that platform journalism is a breading a new form of journalism in Zimbabwe- “dissidence journalism” where news organisations participate and share information that, some, could not be possible to be published in offline spaces.

Table 4: Selected Popular Tweets for 23-24 August 2023

Twitter Handle	Text	Likes	Retweets
@PacheduZw	THESE HILLER RD AGENTS ARE THE MVPs!!! Thank you, champions!!! #DefendTheVotezw	4813	1064
@PacheduZw	We are still up an Mandla HQ. resending our SMS's remember consolidation is the most crucial part. We have to get it is in our system. Thus far we have only seen the huge gap in Kotwa 405 against 60 but inroads by opposition in rural areas. Long way to go! #ZimDecides	3619	1550
@citezw	#Masvingo. A car is station at house number 7411 Chiteza Street, Rujeko B less than 300 metres from the Rujeko Ward 7 Masvingo urban polling station. They also have a ZEC voter's roll and are ticking names of those who have voted. #Asakhe #ElectionsZW #ZimElection2023	2381	1328
@citezw	#Bulawayo Aspiring Ward 4 councillor for CCC David Coltart says illegalities have marred the run up this election as there have been breaches of the constitution and the Electoral Act. #Asakhe #ElectionsZW #ZimElection2023	2514	1250

Constructing an Electoral Crisis

One of the key debates on X was centered around the electoral crisis where for the first time the SADC observer mission declared the results not being free, fair and credible.

The move shocked the ruling ZANU-PF which has been enjoying ‘cuddling’ from the regional bloc. As a result, social media users took advantage of this and created a crisis out of the electoral process. A crisis is socially constructed as what might be a crisis to some might be a mere problem to others. Hence, crisis communication becomes a ‘framing contest’ (Boin et al., 2009). On Zimbabwe’s Twittersphere, SADC’s report was used as the basis for declaring the elections as invalid. For ZEC, the institution is framed as having run shambolic elections resulting in “*Zim elections marred by ‘gigantic fraud’ claims”.* Running under the #FreshElections hashtag, social media users called for new elections given that the circumstances that prevailed as noted by SADC were not conducive for free and fair elections.

> PLEASE REPOST CALL FOR PROTEST
>
> We are rejecting the notion of @ZECzim reducing elections in Zimbabwe to something equivalent to just two wolves (Zanu-PF and FAZ) and a sheep(CITIZENS) voting on what to have for dinner. #FreshElections #ElectionsZW #PeoplePower

> @ProfJNMoyo says SADC observers’ report is a nullity & dismisses new polls. @ibbosnr thinks the report is a true reflection of situation & proposes a transitional govt. A cowntry in conflict with itself. The election foundation was wrong; it has to be redone. Things such as the delimitation, nomination, voter registration, education and etc,” @wenyikaiman

What is also striking from citizens in the ‘black parliament’ is that some of them became legal aspects where they evoked legal instruments to challenge the electoral outcome which they say fell short of meeting the country’s constitution. Writing on the platformasition of content, Gibbs et al. (2015, 257) describe as the “unique combination

of styles, grammars, and logics, which can be considered as constituting a 'platform vernacular.'" In this case, shared screenshots of the constitution and legal statutes while some members of the black parliament were interpreting its meaning, and the impact it has on the irregularity of elections.

Some called for the release of the electoral receipts informing of votes counted per polling station which are captured in what is called a V11 form against the constitutional requirement. Some of the comments read: "ZEC refuses to issue V11s citing its not compelled by the law to publish V11 forms," while another user took creatively crafted a newspaper headline, and posted: "ZEC: We're Not Compelled By Law To Publish Polling Station Return Form (V.11) #ZimDecides2023." Fuelling the speculation that the elections were rigged in favour of the ruling ZANU-PF, users questioned why the electoral body was refusing to release the V11 forms by stating: "If ZEC really believes ED has won why is it so frightened of publishing the V11 forms?".

As once mentioned earlier, failed electoral processes have of late been the source of military coups in Africa. social media users called for "peaceful uprising" to protest a "flawed election" while one remarked:

> @_AfricanUnion somehow it's you who promote coups in Africa. You are always seen sideline with dictatorship governments like this of Zimbabwe. No credible elections in Zimbabwe, you get complaints from opposition but you don't act, soldiers finally take action n you complain.

More so, social media users were opting for an electoral uprising as any democratic means was bound to reach a brick wall. An interesting observation was made by one user who argued that approaching the court to challenge the results was an exercise in futility.

> A judge whose tenure was unconstitutionally extended cannot be expected to be an unbiased adjudicator moreso after accepting a $400 000 bribe from the incumbent. You all know what needs to happen but are not prepared for it. You want someone to do it for you as always!

The observation was made after High Court Judges were given $400 000 ahead of the elections while the chief justice's term was controversially extended. Under these circumstances, social media users were framing the judicial system as being under the pockets of the ruling ZANU-PF government, and expecting a fair ruling from that such system is akin to expecting honey from a fly. The framing of the judiciary as not impartial and not in a position to give people a fair hearing on electoral issues is one of the aspects of platforms. Some of the three aspects that Gillespie (2010) identified as key characteristics of platforms are *architectural* which is something, values and beliefs which the person stands for. Second, *figurative* constitutes a chance to improve something; and *politics* becomes a stage on which an individual endorses their beliefs. For this reason, X became a stage where citizens used to reject the electoral process and strongly argued that the process failed to meet the regional and international statutes.

Concluding Discussion

There has been a raging debate over the effect of platforms' instrumentalisation and affecting political and social change. This debate has been ongoing for the past decade and half that commenced following the Arab Spring uprisings followed by the Iranian Twitter revolution and the recent reconfiguration of government in Kenya following what

has been dubbed the ‘Gen Z Tik Tok protests’ (Mwaura 2024). As Gladwell (2010) and Morozov (2012) argued, there has been an exaggerated premium placed on social networking sites. However, there is no denying, even by vehement skeptics, that platforms play a key role in activism. Other than creating collective actions such as protesting abuse of state power and building connective actions, the creativity of platform users enables them to come up with frames that will likely make the information go viral, and in some cases, make money out of them through monitising their content. In some cases, as observed in this paper, the visibility of content is made possible through programmability of platforms which has seen users being able to manipulate the algorithms by coming up with working words, phrases or sharing their content with influencers (Hutchison 2021). In this paper, we established that networked frames around the electoral crisis were important in shaping discourses. Meraz and Papacharissi (2013) defined networked frames as the framing whereby actors keep the information circulating, and their own layers of information, knowledge, beliefs, and experiences. For the electoral process, ‘evidence’ of electoral malpractices being given by different users from different parts of the country gave the message more weight and heightened the degree of believability. It is such evidence that made some of the information trend. The era of algorithms that power social media sites transform them into platforms which have since become a “multi-sided market in which a platform enables interactions between two or more distinct parties' ' (Rochet and Tirole 2003, 990). Our findings, arguably, show the creativity of users to predict the behavior of algorithms by creating ‘coded language’ in the form of hashtags to connect with the broader community. For this reason, programmability in platforms should be approached in two ways. First, the ‘structural

algorithms' which are inbuilt algorithms that power the work of platforms, and the social algorithms which look at the creativity of users to trigger the structural algorithms to propagate certain information or discourses. However, Mirbabaie et al. (2021, 25) argued, connective action theory is "based more on the use of information technologies and engaged in digitally networked action, which leads to weaker ties in the network of participants." Due to these weak ties, much of the networked activism around democratisation in Zimbabwe, has seen elite voices being lone voices highlighting the crisis.

In this paper we argued that the blind spot in activism is the platformisation of information, especially the influence of commerce on the use of the platform. However, this might become a problem, especially in the era of misinformation and disinformation. Social media users are bound to channel out any content that is likely to be false, especially using vernacular language which cannot be easily flagged by the algorithms or verified. The recent actions by the big tech companies, Meta and X, to retreat on content moderation indicates the dangers of misinformation and propaganda likely to flood the virtual public sphere. The aspect of programmability brings up an interesting dimension of not only virility of the content, but the platforms become the market of place of either idea, emotions, and commerce. The aspect of commerce fuels 'dissidence behaviour online (see Matsilele 2020), as seen in this paper where some were calling for a coup as they could not tolerate the legitimacy of the government which they argue had stolen their votes through a sham election.

In the African context, while the work of periphery players has attracted much attention, the scholarship hasn't gone much to theorise the work of such players within the realm of

platform journalism. Our findings indicate that peripheral players like CITE, and ZimLive can claim ‘journalistic authority’ which was ‘eroded’ by citizen journalists (see Tshuma et al., 2024). Findings demonstrated that the influence of the legacy media is under threat as the news organisation operating in the margin under platform journalism played a critical role in mediating the electoral process as seen by their popularity as the source of news and content on the voting days. Under platform journalism, algorithms inform platform logics- ways of processing and presenting communication (Hase et al., 2023) which as the case in this paper, CITE, and ZimLive had to select, adapt, and produce news in line with logics pushed forward by platforms (van Dijck and Poell, 2013).

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[1] Gukurahundi is a colloquial expression, which in Shona means “the storm that destroys everything”.

[2] FAZ was used by or spearheaded by the dreaded CIO which is known for abducting citizens.