

## Public self-censorship in WhatsApp intra-group communication in Zimbabwe

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### Abstract

The social networking sites have been lauded for their ability to offer mediascapes that enable the full exercise of individual rights and freedoms; such as the right to privacy on social networking sites, freedom of expression and association, among others. This is significant given that the majority of the world's population now has a significant presence on social media. Communication trends indicate a shift from interaction in the real/physical world to more interactions and transactions occurring online or in virtual space. This necessitates an exploration of the extent to which privacy and freedom of expression are guaranteed in online interactions. The study reveals the perpetuation of a spiral of silence whereby participants in intra-group communication engage in public self-censorship. Using online participant observation, in which the researcher used data collected from four WhatsApp groups, and the Censorship regimes model, the study interrogates how public self-censoring is implicated even in spaces where no such censoring is otherwise not required.

**Keywords:** censorship, online interaction, social networking, social media

### Introduction

Social media is widely celebrated for expanding existing mediascapes and providing alternative spaces for sociopolitical engagement. It is widely regarded as a liberative platform that is becoming increasingly popular for its ability to enable free expression. The proliferation of social media in the third world is thus largely celebrated within the context of the state capture of traditional media. Moyo, Oluyinka and Chabwinja (2014) and Willems (2010; 2011; 2015) note how the constraining and disabling legal system in Zimbabwe has resulted in the constriction of democratic spaces for expressing dissent. Laws such as the Broadcasting Services Act of 2001, Public Order and Security Act of 2002, Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Bill of 2002, Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act of 2006 and Censorship and Entertainment Controls Act are targeted at cracking down on political criticism and dissent. These laws not only seriously curtailed formal media but also gained control over public speech (Willems, 2010), as well as internet content. Serious engagement could only be done at the peril of the individual. This disabling environment however led to various forms of alternative mediation as citizens sought to re-democratise communication.

The research investigates the manifestation of a spiral of silence effect arising from censorship regimes in WhatsApp group communication on two sociopolitical issues that happened at the end of 2017, respectively. The first is Zimbabwe's coup that took place in November 2017. The coup introduced a unique political dispensation in the country as, in an extraordinary week, the country was considered to be leaderless as the Army refused to characterise its actions as a coup.

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Mugabe's refusal to step down during the political upheaval presented the generality of the population with a topical issue for debate. The situation resulted in a highly polarised political climate in which some people wanted the coup to succeed whilst others wanted it to fail. Yet another segment of the community that was unsure of how the events would eventually end up leading to fears of overtly revealing their position. WhatsApp provided a space on which the group participants expressed their opinion with regards to whether they wanted Mugabe to be overthrown or continue with his presidency. The research focuses on the extent to which group participants were free to express their attitudes and, crucially, how the participants took on the roles of censor and censee, particularly on the enforcement of the fit.

The second relates to a situation whereby a standoff on a labour issue between management and teaching staff, at Midlands State University, had to resolve what participants regarded as a sensitive issue. Specifically, the teaching staff had to come up with a position paper to be presented to management. Interest on the issue relates to the extent to which participants in the staff group were comfortable and willing to fully engage the issue on their WhatsApp group. The study interrogates the extent to which censorship regimes are implicated in the creation and perpetuation of a spiral of silence on social networking sites (SNS) in so far as the expression of contested and controversial socio-political value positions is concerned. Carlson and Settle (2016) argue that participants do not always express their opinions in interactive situations where they feel others are likely to disagree with them. In such cases, they are likely to conform with the prevailing climate of opinion; thereby leading to the formation of the chameleon identity on SNS. In the process, the study extends Hampton et al. (2014) and Feenstra's research on the discursive manifestation of the spiral of silence on SNS whereby participants opt for political correctness at the expense of candidness.

### **Social media group communication and issues of security and privacy**

The instant message system (IM) has brought about an easiness to communication, enabling multiple participants via group chats (Rosler, Mainka, & Schwenk 2017). The groups can be constituted based on any number of demographic factors. These include familial, professional/work, religious and educational affiliations, among others. Inevitably, groups can bring together people from diverse backgrounds and with various degrees of intimacy. Alassiri, Muda and bin Ghazali (2014) observe that social networking sites are increasingly becoming more significant especially in light of the evolving mediascapes for "social communities from the physical to the digital realm" (p. 47). As such, social media is much more than a recreational space. Warner and Chen (2017,) regard proliferation of social media as having led to the emergence of new linguistic communities and it has morphed into a space "where significant portions of our daily interactions and transactions play out" (p. 122).

Rosler et al. (2017) discuss security and privacy from the perspective of surveillance by state intelligence. For them, the end-to-end encryption security protocol is the panacea to users' security and privacy problems as it guarantees confidentiality of social media communication. Li, Sanchez and Hua (2016) and Rastogi and Hendler (2017) argue that the new WhatsApp version 2.16.2 ensures total privacy. Thus, from a strictly technological perspective, WhatsApp is free from eavesdropping, thereby guaranteeing freedom of expression and association. However, security and privacy transcends the technological dynamic. The political mood of the era is definitive in determining the extent to which users of social media platforms feel comfortable to utter controversial and contested value positions (Chadwick, September 24, 2017; Gruzd et al., 2018).

### **Self-censorship and the spiral of silence on SNSs**

Horton (2011) characterises self-censorship as a phenomenon in which there is “only one party that is both censor and censored” (p. 97). It involves a deliberate decision to opt for silence (Sun 2014). Generally defined in relation to state-instituted censorship, it persists on an everyday basis to the extent that it may be so subtle it may even go unnoticed. In this light, it may either be a habitual or an unreflective disposition. In either case, it can easily lead to conformity whereby users “refus[e] to be critical of the status quo even when presented with a chance to do so” (Media Matters for Democracy 2018, p. 13).

Cowles (2014) argues that despite social media being more prominent than ever, there is growing evidence of a tendency to self-censor ‘unpopular’ sentiments. She regards the reward-punishment regimes of sites like Facebook and Twitter as predisposing users to sentiments that are most likely to elicit the greatest number of likes and retweets. In this economy, users are forced to exercise discretion aimed at maintaining and attracting friends and followers.

Hampton et al. (2014) argue that social media creators and users hoped that SNSs will bring about positive changes in so far as their ability to provide alternative spaces for engaging with minority opinions and value positions amongst family, friends and peers. Instances where opinions are not shared because they are not widely shared are referred to as the spiral of silence. Their study reveals that SNSs did little to broaden public discourse and adding new perspectives to everyday discussion of political issues as people were more willing to discuss the Snowden-NSA story in person than on Twitter and Facebook. More importantly, users were willing to share their views only in cases where they felt their followers were more likely to agree with them.

Tanash et al. (2017) examine the resulting discursive patterns as a result of the 2017 Turkish coup on Twitter. The coup represented a turning point in Turkey’s political trajectory. The study therefore expected its effect to be significantly reflected on Twitter. However, the researchers discovered that users engaged in self-censorship through three main ways: a reduction in overall Twitter usage, voluntary deletion of pro-coup tweets and switching of accounts to protected mode. This suggested users’ internalisation of government censorship.

As much as 71% of Facebook users in the United States of America engage in last-minute self-censorship (Das & Kramer, 2013; Madrigal, April 5, 2013) in which users fail to post information they would have initially typed out. This applies for both new posts and comments. The study cites five common reasons for this behaviour. These include to avoid sparking arguments, concerns that posts may offend and hurt someone, and a fear of undermining their self-presentation, among others.

Gruzd et al. (2018) show that Canadian social media users were protecting their privacy through self-censorship even before the Cambridge Analytica scandal. They establish that as much as 50% of online Canadian adults self-censored their posts mainly out of fear that companies may misuse their personal data. Significantly, the users themselves were not very sure about the general private settings of social platforms. Resultantly, through privacy-protection behaviour, users felt compelled to self-censor so as to ensure their privacy.

The Zimbabwe Development Institute and Media Centre (2017) explored the ‘state of internet governance in Zimbabwe’. Their report reveals that, “despite guarantees in: (a) international law protocols to which Zimbabwe is party and (b) the national Constitution; the authoritarian regime has devised various strategies to stifle, capture and control this space” (p. 7).

These strategies include, the passing of Acts of Parliament aimed at curtailing freedoms, institutionalization of clampdowns on online freedoms through state agencies and security as well

as intelligence arms and the issuing out of threats by top government officials. As such, citizens are aware that they do not really enjoy the freedoms that are otherwise associated with social media platforms.

Thus, self-censorship is largely defined as an individual phenomenon, whereby users act on external pressures. However, Mai (2018) argues that self-censorship is a public rather than an individual one. This underscores the 'social' nature of the privacy problem on social media. This is especially so in WhatsApp intra-group communicative setup in which the conceptualisation of the self necessarily has to be expanded to include the role of other group participants. Sendler (2012) expands the definition of self-censorship to account for group participants' decisions to refrain from expressing their attitudes. Cook and Heilmann (2010) distinguish between private and public self-censorship. Public self-censorship is whereby a censee aligns their sentiments to a public censor. Feenstra (2012) characterises this alignment process as individuals behaving like "[political] chameleons trying to blend into the environment for protection" (p. 1). Her study reveals how social networking can result in conformity as participants match a socially desirable norm; especially so in polarised sociopolitical environments. Hayes (2007) observes how, in such contexts, individuals may not express their true opinions especially when the opinion is regarded as uncommon. In extreme cases, individuals may actually be afraid of sanctions and other instances of victimisation, either from the government or other external forces, thereby becoming a case of "self-censorship bad" (Sendler 2012, p. 14).

### **Theory**

Analysis of the data was guided by Cook and Heilmann's (2010) Censorship regimes model. The model defines a censorship regime as "a process by which censoring agents establish, justify and enforce a goal of fit between a conception of permissible expressive attitudes and attitudes actually expressed by censee" (4). The model comprises the five elements. These are the: (a) goal of fit, (b) content of the conception, (c) enforcement of the fit, (d) agents, and (e), interaction between censors and censees. In this model, fit pertains to the extent to which the censor and censee share the same position with regards to the expressive attitudes in question. In cases where the sentiments are not in sync, the censee can respond by aligning their expressive attitudes to the censor in any one of the following three ways: (1) perfect alignment, (2) perfect non-alignment and (3) various forms of weak alignment. Thus, it emerges that censorship regimes are evaluated in terms of degrees of success whereby they can be more or less successful.

Taking into consideration that censorship regimes do not really aim to completely change one's private attitudes, as long as they are not publicly expressed or not acted upon, the model is used to explore the rationale behind participants, both instituting censorship and assessing the degree to which censees aligned their expressive attitudes to those of the censoring agent within the group.

### **Methods**

Kozinets (2010) identifies online observation as one of a variety of data collection methods in netnography. Kozinets defines netnography as a participant-observation research into online communities based on online fieldwork. The method uses online or virtual communications as the main source of data to arrive at 'an ethnographic understanding and representation of a cultural or communal phenomenon' (Kozinets, 2010, p. 58). It therefore enables an appreciation of a wider social phenomenon; in this case the circulation of race-related posts. Online observation enabled an immersive engagement with WhatsApp interactions in which participants debated socio-political issues under study. Data was collected during a two-week period spanning from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 24<sup>st</sup> of November 2017. The events of 14 - 24 November 2017 represent a crucial turning turn in Zimbabwe's political trajectory. It is during this period that the Zimbabwean army set in

motion a series of events which led to the deposition of Robert Mugabe who had hitherto maintained a thirty-seven-year repressive rule of Zimbabwe in which political dissent was not tolerated. It is also during this time that teaching staff at Midlands State University, were discussing what issues to include in a position paper on labour practices that was to be presented to the university management.

The researcher used five WhatsApp groups: two familial (paternal and maternal); a sports group comprised of basketball players; a religious group comprised of members from the researcher's church; and professional group comprised of workmates. Purposive sampling was used in the selection of the groups as they offered the establishment of a sliding scale they offered in relation to the degree of familiarity and intimacy amongst respective participants. The degree of familiarity and intimacy amongst participants can go a long way in determining the extent to which they feel the level of confidentiality of their sentiments, and therefore the degree they feel secure that otherwise controversial and political value positions will remain within the bounds of the group. The hypothesis is that familial groups offer the highest degree of familiarity and intimacy as they are formed based on blood ties. The assumption being that family members will look out for each other and will therefore offer the biggest sense of security to group members. Thus, participants are less-likely to censor their expressive attitudes. The other groups offer varying degrees of familiarity and intimacy amongst participants. Participants are not assured that fellow group participants have their best interest at heart and are more likely to censor their opinions. This is especially pertinent in light of Bookworms' (2015) observation that Zimbabweans have endured so much backlash and victimisation from expressing political sentiments to the extent that, "With fear of violence and abductions and sometimes unwarranted murders, everyone suspects each other to be spies and our communities became fragmented webs of mutual suspicions" (*The Standard*, June 29). This is exacerbated by the fact that the mole to sell-out one to the establishment can literally be anyone thereby making it difficult to determine who to protect oneself from.

The researcher observed how interaction proceeded relating to two sociopolitical topics in the group. To ensure that other group participants were not self-conscious about their contributions, the observations were anonymously done. The researcher noted how interaction concerning the topics under study proceeded. The major rationale for this was to authentically follow the interactions to their logical conclusion and, therefore, gain a full appreciation of the communication dynamic involved. In the presentation of data, the real names of the participants are not given. Instead, they are presented as letters of the alphabet. This way, the study protects their privacy.

## **Discussion**

The study explores how the censorship regime that results in public self-censorship of sociopolitical sentiments by participants in WhatsApp intra-group interactive situations. As such, the research focuses on the discussion of two issues. One pertaining to Zimbabwe's coup and the other relating to the crafting of a position paper by employees against their employer at a work station. Analysis of the data is mainly centered on the enforcement of the fit, the agents involved and the nature of the interaction between censors and censees.

### *Politically-motivated public self-censorship*

The term 'politically-motivated self-censorship' is employed in this study to refer to a censorship regime in which censors and censees operated within a framework informed by the fear to criticise the state lest one may be met with unpleasant consequences. It was no big surprise that news of the formation of the otherwise short-lived Cyber Security, Threat Detection and Mitigation Ministry in October 2017 was met with the circulation of the following joke on WhatsApp:

All group admins are requested to apply for operating licences [sic] and practice certificates. Attach police clearance & passport photo b4 1 Dec  
— zuvaradoka (@siradmiral) (Maveriq, October 9, 2017)

It typifies jokes that circulated on various social media platforms immediately following the formation of the ministry. However, in a somewhat sarcastic way, the reference to 'group admins' acknowledges the possibility of state surveillance of social media communication. WhatsApp group administrators have the power to form groups as well as to add or remove group participants thereby giving them some degree of control, however small, over what is posted. The suggestion of a vetting-process by the police (accused to be part of the ideological state apparatus) implies that group communication has to conform to state expectations. The joke suggests the announcement of Big Brother watching social media communications. As such, the joke signaled an implicit warning that people should be wary of their social media posts thereby suggesting a need to censor content. It emerges that the goal of fit in these kind of posts is to conceptualise the permissible expressive attitudes in the posts as those that are not anti-disestablishment. That is, participants posting such posts in groups act as censoring agents warning fellow members not to post content that do not confirm to specified standards.

There are multiple ways in which content posted on WhatsApp suggested surveillance by the state. The present study argues that the posts were not arbitrarily posted. Rather, they had a communicative function that was aimed at making people more conscious of the content they posted on WhatsApp. As such, they go a long way in delineating the goal of fit in the actual contributions that participants can make in the groups. This is underscored in a highlighted post purported to have originated from the 'Ministry of Interior' announcing new censorship regime in which the government will henceforth monitor social media and electronic communications in the country. The participant posting such type of a message is regarded as the censor. By 'forward[ing the message] as received' they do not question both the legitimacy and rationale of the message. The suggestion that all social media is monitored as 'all devices are connected to the ministry systems' may not come out to some as completely far-fetched especially when taken in light of the Interception of Communications Act of 2007 which, among other provisions, makes it mandatory to register sim cards (Privacy International, 2016).

In the context of Zimbabwe's repressive political climate 'unnecessary' is synonymous with political dissent. Karombo (October 14, 2017) explains that:

It's easy to understand why social media is something of a thorn in the government's side. The 93-year old president has become a meme on African social media (not just Zimbabwe) for "closing his eyes" during major events, reading the wrong speech and tripping over

Whilst some participants just thanked their colleague for posting the 'Ministry of Interior', one particular response questioned the authenticity of the message as by pointing out that:

We do not even have a ministry called Ministry of Interior! ....and....ZRP cannot make laws especially laws such as mentioned here that actually change the constitution. Isn't this a post from another country??

The response highlights two major discrepancies. Firstly, Zimbabwe does not have a 'Ministry of Interior'. The Zimbabwe Republic Police falls under the Ministry of Home Affairs. The second pertains to whether the police has the mandate to arbitrarily enact/make laws. However, the response, crucially, does not question the rationale behind the circulation of the message in the

first place. It does not question why the government has to infringe upon people's individual's rights to privacy, expression and association. It raises important questions as to what the response would be had the nomenclature of the ministry been 'correctly' captured. Would it have justified it being taken seriously by the people? The response is however consistent with Cook and Heinmann's (2010) theorisation that censorship regimes are only more or less successful as the censee may respond with, among others, various forms of 'weak alignment'. In this case, the participant does not align themselves to the advice to desist from posting political messages.

The coup presented Zimbabweans with a potentially free environment to express their sentiments against Mugabe and the coup who could no longer not directly influence political processes at that point in time. One would have expected that social media users would seize the moment to freely express themselves, on WhatsApp. It is therefore surprising that the specter of 'political content' continued to cast its shadow on people's expressive ability during that crucial period. One particular post warned group members to:

Please make sure you have your ID, as I understand that these are being requested at road blocks. Furthermore, please also delete content off your phone as I understand that soldiers are asking to see people's phones. Please pass on the message to your team members.

The discourse in the circulated message is consistent with the new political dispensation ushered by the 'military intervention'. There were indeed roadblocks that were manned by soldiers, and not the regular traffic police. People were also asked to produce their national identity documents (IDs) at these roadblocks. The new information in that message pertains to the deletion of content on the phone since the soldiers were believed to be asking to see the phones. It is disheartening how the message does not question why the military was 'requesting' (demanding) to go through citizens' phones in the first place. For a period dubbed the '[utopic] New Dispensation', it suggested users' lack of online privacy. The term 'offensive' in this case refers to content that may be critical to the military intervention. Deletion of what participants regarded potentially offensive and incriminating represents the operation of the spiral of silence as they chose not to express the deleted opinions. This implies that participants were only free to post messages that praised the new political order ushered in by the military intervention.

The option to either forward or delete messages received via WhatsApp alluded to in the two posts are discursive practices that are symbolic of two distinct political stances users can adopt relating to received 'political' messages. On the one hand, forwarding, or not deleting the 'dissident' material, is construed as a sign of supporting its ideological positions. Deletion, on the other hand, symbolises opting for a hear-no-evil, see-no-evil and speak-no-evil stance. It promotes the "silencing of opponents and entrenchment of power" (The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, 2009). At its worst, it is the wiping off of political memory. The deleted information represents a significant, but unwanted, part of the country's political history.

What is apparent in the two posts above is that the participants, acting as the censor, posting the content in the groups are not its originators. They would have accessed the content elsewhere and then decide to 'warn' their colleagues about the dangers of posting and/or keeping political messages in their phones. That is, they would not be the ones actually specifying the goal of fit. Other, posts however suggested a different dynamic in that the censor is the one who is actually delineating the goal of fit. This is typified in the two instances below:

- X:** *Ukaona mai vakafa ukasara naStep mother unochiona.... ask Zimbabweans mai vavo Sally vakafa ikozvino vana Step mother Dr. Amai Stop it.... baba vanobva waitwa saskum kutadza kana kumiririra vana vavo Chibatisisei chichiri kupisa□□□□□□*
- Y:** *Mucharohwa imi kkkk*
- X:** *Bhudhi vangu mupurisa*
- Y:** *Mapurisa hamirire horomori dze politics kkk nehwangu nzvee upenyu 𠄎 𠄎*
- (X:** Once your mother dies and you are left under the custody/care of a stepmother you will suffer. Ask Zimbabweans. Their mother Sally Mugabe died. Now there are in the care of step mother Dr Amai Stop it. The father is made/turned into a lunatic who fails to protect his children.  
Look after this joke/message very well. It's still hot/fresh
- Y:** you will be beaten kkkk
- X:** My brother is a policeman
- Y:** The police does not protect political criminals/offenders kkk. I escape with my life)
- A:** BREAKING NEWS! Mugabe joins the March
- B:** Kkkk iii 🖐🖐
- C:** *Marohwa mainini (you as good as beaten little sister)*

In the two cases above, participants post jokes relating the political environment during the Mugabe-military impasse. Thus, just as in the first two cases, the participants were not the originators of the posts. What however distinguishes the two sets of posts is their communicative goals. Whilst the first set sought to discourage criticising the New Dispensation, the second celebrated the impending demise of the First Family. What is then interesting is that, in the latter set, other members of the group respond to the posts by warning the individual in question. Both responses allude to beatings (*kurohwa*) as punishment for 'political offenders'. Thus, the responses suggest that the posted jokes are regarded as the commission of a political crime. In the first instance, the first participant, **X**, posts a joke pertaining to the former First Lady of Zimbabwe, Dr Grace Mugabe (Dr Amai and Stop It). These nicknames are never meant to express the people's affection towards her. 'Stop it', in particular, refers to her infamous entrance into politics and involvement in ZANU PF faction battles which resulted in the expulsions of party cadres. These expulsions were almost invariably preceded by a speech given by the First lady in which the targeted cadres were ordered to 'stop it!'

The same post also invokes the evil stepmother identity bestowed on Grace Mugabe. She has always been cast in the shadow of Mugabe's first wife, Sally. Comparisons between the two have always been kind on Sally, on the one hand, and cruel on Grace, on the other. The evil stepmother identity is a political narrative meant to perpetuate how Grace is not First Lady material. Implicated in this narrative is how she turned Robert Mugabe, her husband, against the nation – his own children. It also perpetuates the idea that Grace Mugabe is a 'natural disaster' that happened to both Mugabe and the Zimbabwean people and that the First Family is unfit to lead the state.

In this case, it is now the respective respondents to the posts who are acting as the censors. In this instance, the goal of fit is to stop other participants from expressing negative attitudes that criticise the first family. This is enforced in a number of ways. The first post makes subtle reference to police involvement in political matters. The police should be apolitical and ensure the upholding and protection of everyone's rights. The brother, who actually happens to be a policeman, refuses to promise to come to his sister's aid or rescue, should she be punished for her joke, on the basis that he does not want to be involved in 'political issues' and does not therefore have a death wish.



The ZANU PF- led government has always been accused of using the coercive state apparatus, as well as the justice system, to “intimidate and pulverize the electorate into submission” (The Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum 2012, p.3). It is also in this light that the image of the two open palms (👐) in the breaking news message is read as a sign of surrendering and distancing oneself from the otherwise ‘incriminating’ post. That is, both the brother (C) and the other respondent (B) enact an element of deniability. The brother’s use of the emoji of the running [away] person represents a discursive distancing away from the political issue under discussion, thereby ensuring deniability in the event of negative political outcomes. The obvious assumption in both messages is, of course, that the communications will be seen, inevitably or otherwise, by one state agency or the other and that there will also be some dire consequences. Although the message, on the surface, comes out as free advice offered by a concerned relative, it also comes out as the internalization and the perpetuation of institutionalised state terror aimed at quashing the expression of alternative political value positions. The ‘warnings’ express an underlying fear that expressing one’s opinion may possibly lead to very unpleasant consequences; which in this case are conceptualised in the form of beatings. The work of the infamous ZANU PF youth militia such as Chipangano and Taliban concretise this fear (Sachikonye, 2011). The natural acceptance/internalisation of political violence, which could even be fatal, is tragic. The warning issued out Y and C above are therefore read as implicit attempts to discourage the expression of sentiments that were derided the First Family. Taking into consideration that both X and A do not pursue further suggests that they had taken heed of the warnings and chose to then keep their silence having realized that other members were against the expression of their value positions. Thus, the spiral of silence was perpetuated.

The ‘breaking news’ interaction alludes to the absurdity of Mugabe joining in the Anti-Mugabe March of 18 November 2017. The implication being that Mugabe also saw himself so unfit to continue his rule that he actually decided to march against himself. On the surface, there was no need to exercise restraint on their engagement of coup-related issues; that is, unless citizens thought that the army intervention was destined for failure and Mugabe was going to bounce back with vengeance against his critics.

What boggles the mind is the fact that these interactions took place as Zimbabweans were celebrating their ‘freedom’ during the coup period. The example below epitomises how people conceptualised their own ‘free’ during this period:

No President, no vise [sic], no second vise [sic], no police, *tirima* (we are) free spirits

The message about the absence of the Presidium captures the peculiar political status quo during the two-week coup period. There was no President (who was under house arrest) and there were also no Vice Presidents (Emmerson Munangagwa was fired by Mugabe on the 5<sup>th</sup> of November 2017 and Phelekezela Mphoko was just being ‘ignored’ by the prevailing ‘political system’ of the period). Why then participants were being told to exercise discretion in the messages they posted is a mystery. The fact is that people were presented with a rare opportunity for political engagement. The posts themselves state that there was no ‘government’ and the police had just been rendered impotent. It is therefore surprising that fellow participants would encourage self-censoring. It nonetheless confirms the fears expressed by media and communications watchdog, Media Institute of Southern Africa (2017) that the political environment in Zimbabwe perpetuates self-censorship in online interactions when people engage on topical issues affecting the country. As such, it points to people internalising how they lack freedom after speech (Moyo et al. 2014).

The interaction between censor and censee in the cases of the posted above offer interesting reading. In the step-mother joke, there is some relative degree of refusing to cower from the

threats of being beaten. What is interesting is that the participant does not deny the possibility of being beaten for posting political messages. They suggest that they are depending on the police's protection to avoid them. It is the silence that takes place after the brother refuses to offer such protection that is crucial. The matter is dropped and there is no further discussion on the issue. Significantly, this is typical of the interactions in the other posts. The issue is just left hanging with no further debate. It is akin to a spiral of silence phenomenon whereby an opinion is then left unexpressed and/or undeveloped upon the realisation of its unpopularity. Most importantly, it supports Feenstra's (2014) observation that interactional dynamics can influence the expression of political attitudes and how, in this case, participants behave like political chameleons to ensure their protection. What is critical in this case is that the silence that follows each interaction between group participants is regarded as a case whereby the whole group then opts for silence by failing not to continue discussing the issue at hand. It has to be noted that even other participants, not directly involved in the exchange, would have potentially followed the exchange but decide to keep their opinions to themselves. This is also regarded as some form of self-censorship. This does not however mean that the suspended opinions would be changed. Cook and Heilmann (2010) state how:

censorship regimes do not aim to change the private attitudes of censees, as long as the censored attitudes are not [publically] expressed or acted on (p. 5).

It means that the continued discussion of the controversial topics could have been outside the group forum thereby compromising the quality and quantity of political engagement held in intra-group communicative setups.

#### *Socially-motivated public self-censorship*

Whilst the section above showed that the enforcement of fit was made in the paradigm of repressive political climate, this section explores how censors use social factors to align errant expressed attitudes. Data from interactions in the workplace group are used in this section. The workplace comprises different individuals who are brought together to an institution for socioeconomic mobility. Depending on the size of the institution, these individuals can be a large heterogeneous group of people who may not necessarily know each other intimately. They may also harbor competing interests in the institution. Big institutions which have the capacity to employ a big number of people who, out of necessity, have to work under different schedules. Bringing these people together for purposes of engaging on institutional matters that impact on their lives is typically difficult.

Workers at the institution under study have a tendency of holding their meetings in a hall, usually during the lunch hour. They come together in their numbers to discuss issues pertinent to their livelihoods. Members are generally free to express their opinions which then contribute towards the reaching of a resolution or common position that is taken to be representative of the worker's union. However, out of the realisation that there is need to involve as many people as possible in these debates, it was resolved that there was need to look for a more inclusive platform. Social media, specifically a WhatsApp group, was then adopted as a platform to alleviate the dilemma. However, there is a general sense of the need to exercise discretion. This comes out in the interaction below:

**D:** Wel i mean they are sme sensitive issues wch a person cn raise in this grup ...and u gt victimized ... u knw sme pple are double minded they go forth and back.....they dip in msla and also dip in th mgemnt dish ..... and u end up being targetted (well, I mean they are some sensitive issues which a person can raise in this group ...and you get victimized...You know some people are double-minded. They can

go forth and back. The dip in MSULA and also dip in the management dish. And you end up being targeted.

- E:** You are right Sir. And we are fully aware of that. *Asi voruzhinji tikabatana* ('but if we unite in our numbers') then those few will not have any material effect. There is strength in numbers and... enjure one enjure all (injure one injure all).
- F:** Its normal that everything we say here immediately get relayed and we should expect that. But that should never significantly affect us especially if our actions are above board and we are only requiring fair labour practice.

The interaction underscores users' skepticism of group communication. It is difficult for group members to fully exercise their freedom of expression out of fear infiltration by chameleons working for the management. Thus, afraid of being compromised and of retribution from the management if their discussions are leaked to them, discussions may not be as earnest and fruitful. It therefore defeats the whole objective of forming the group in the first place.

This sense of futility especially came out when the employees had to draft an urgent position document to present to the management during negotiations of a particular issue. Bearing in mind that the WhatsApp group was the only platform through which the majority could participate, it was imperative that everyone contributed such that the members spoke in one voice through the draft. The following interaction captures the discussion proceedings:

- G:** Is it possible *kuti muise* draft *yacho paplatform pano* ('Is it possible for you to upload the draft on this platform?'). Or is it already here?
- H:** Yes we can put the draft here for members only and not for circulation. Do we have those guarantees?
- I:** *apa panonetsa mozoona dzobuda* ('Now that is a difficult/a problem. You will find it emerging') in certain circles we may not want the draft to appear
- J:** *Ngavauye* physically *ikoko* coz *kuisa kuinbox kweindividual hazvina kumbosiyana nekuisa pagroup* ('they must physically come there because inboxing it to individuals is just the same as uploading it on the group')
- K:** *Taurai henyu* ('you can say that again') Cde **J**
- L:** You don't advertise your weapons and strategies if you are going into a battle. Lets leave everything in the hands of our Executive. Lets just present our concerns to them. They should devise their own strategies for negotiating the resolution of our concerns. *Isu tomirira ma results acho* ('we just have to wait for the results [of the negotiations]').
- M:** That's very true
- N:** Social platforms incur many leakages and these can be a disadvantage to the noble cause

The interactions above highlight a serious problem associated with WhatsApp group communication. In a large group, it is difficult to judge whether individual members have group's best interests at heart. Being a member of the group does not necessarily mean that you automatically protect its interests. It is apparent that the leaders of the association, represented by H, wanted to upload the draft on the platform for members deliberate on and come up with a common position. It is then paradoxical that it's actually the members who dissuade him from uploading it. That members were actually expected to physically go and see that document is a tragedy given that it is not everyone who was in a position to do so.

It emerges that the popular position is in fact a position against the utility of the social media in furthering the association's interests. It actually nullified the rallying potential of group communication on social media. The association members were presented with chance to speak

as one voice in the negotiations with the management. However, due to mistrust by group members themselves emanating from the fear of the possible presence of chameleons amongst them, the draft ironically ended up predominantly reflecting the position of the executive, and the few who accessed it in person. A further irony is that, no such concerns were, and are, raised when workers physically meet in the hall to discuss their uses. It is as if, they are not afraid of chameleons when they hold face-to-face interactions with their peers. Had it not been due to the very short deadline that the workers were working with, it was not surprising that the same issues could have been actually debated in a regular meeting in the hall. Mistrust associated with chameleons seems to emerge as a direct reflex of the WhatsApp group engagements.

## Conclusion

The study speaks to other researches that have assessed the extent to which privacy and rights to freedom of expression are promoted, fulfilled and guaranteed in Zimbabwe (Human Rights Bulletin 2011). These rights are an important part of any democratic society and the extent to which they are upheld determines the level of genuine engagement that can take place in the country. Failure to have genuine engagements leads to the silencing of dissent and the entrenchment of power. This can take place from both political and social dimensions. In both cases, users continue watching over their shoulders, leading to unnecessary caution, thereby compromising engagements made on social media. Thus, there are sentiments that people continue to leave unexpressed thereby revealing the manifestation of the spiral of silence on sociopolitical issue in SNSs. Melber (2004) argues that historically, Zimbabwe never experienced genuine freedom of expression in the media with Lush and Kupe (2005) considering the constitutional guarantee of freedom of expression as an artefact of the past. The silencing of opinions on social media communication is indicative of how participants are still affected by a need for conformism, both from a political and social perspective as users are pressured to self-censor by fellow participants in intra-group interactions.

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