Unmasking the dictator: How digital technologies expose authoritarianism in Belarus and Zimbabwe

WISHES TENDAYI MUTUTWA

University of Pretoria

UFUOMA AKPOJIVI

advocates for International Development

ABSTRACT

Authoritarian governments seem to use the same methods of coercion the world over. Recent developments in Belarus and Zimbabwe resonate with this observation. President Alexander Lukashenko prevailed in a deeply flawed and controversial election which his opponents claimed was rigged in July 2020, triggering massive countrywide protests by the opposition supporters. In Zimbabwe, corruption over COVID-19 procurement, coupled with a dire economic situation, pushed citizens to organize demonstrations. Both Belarus and Zimbabwean security personnel employed a heavy-headed approach to thwart demonstrations, committing gross human rights abuses under the cover of darkness or under face masks. Although digital activism has received so much credit as a formidable force to challenge power, its success in dismantling oppressive regimes and systems is a subject of debate. In light of this debate, this qualitative article employed counterpublics as a theoretical lens to explore Twitter and digital tools that allow ordinary citizens and activists to counter human rights abuses in authoritarian environments, making future quests for justice possible.

KEYWORDS: digital technology; dissident culture; counterpublics; digitization; digital vigilantism; social media; Belarus; Zimbabwe

INTRODUCTION

Globally, there is a growing trend of disputed elections, sparking widespread protests and popular uprisings. Such has been the case for Belarus and Zimbabwe. The August 2020 presidential election in Belarus, in which the 'sitting' President Alexander Lukashenko won overwhelmingly was rejected by opposition parties and discredited by the European Union (Samorukov 2020). With digital technologies at their disposal, ordinary citizens circulated images and videos of election rigging taking place, prompting popular protests demanding the annulment of the election. This was the first step in exposing dictatorship elections, which have a common characteristic of vote fraud. As disgruntled Belarusians took to the streets to protest against Lukashenko's victory, the security apparatus hiding behind face masks or balaclavas used brute force to silence growing dissent (Reichardt and Stępniewski 2020). Amidst human rights abuses on protesters by the masked security apparatus, Belarusian young citizens appropriated digital technologies to reveal the identities of Lukashenko's security men.

Zimbabwe has had authoritarian leadership since the early 1990s when the late President Robert Mugabe gradually introduced repressive legislation, coupled with increased surveillance on dissenting voices as a way to silence growing public frustration with his government. When he was overthrown

by a military-backed civilian uprising in November 2017, the military-controlled government of Emmerson Mnangagwa did so much in closing the democratic space. With inflation soaring to 500 per cent in 2020, worsened by the COVID-19 scourge and corruption involving COVID-19 equipment tender by the politically privileged, ordinary citizens appropriated social media platforms to organize protests (Amnesty International 2020). The state security apparatus were deployed to thwart the popular uprising, abducting key protest figures and inflicting a range of abuses such as torture and sexual violation. To expose these human rights violations, politically privileged individuals gained access to the identity of the security forces and posted their identity on social media. Therefore, this study seeks to address two key questions: What is the role of digital technologies in exposing human rights violations in the authoritarian regimes of Belarus and Zimbabwe? Secondly, are digital technologies changing the status quo of social protest? In this study, digital technologies are a broad range of new media technologies within the cyber sphere that extend to social media platforms. These digital technologies allow the growth of dissident culture as ordinary citizens challenge power without directly confronting it, offering a discursive platform that inspires offline counterhegemonic resistance.

According to Downing (2008), digital media act as spaces of counterhegemonic communication, challenging power and enabling collective action via the massive appropriation of social media by citizens and activists. In the context of authoritarian environments such as Belarus and Zimbabwe, where there are very low levels of freedom of expression (Reporters Without Borders 2016), digital technologies allow citizens to use them as a forum to express and channel different forms of participation (Mututwa et al. 2019) as well as to create and distribute messages that confront power. Couldry described these users of these technologies as 'outsiders', 'gate crashers' and 'interlopers' and dissidents who expand, disrupt and decentre the 'myth of mediated centre', ascribed to professional journalists who are viewed as the 'main constructors of social reality' (2003: 6). These dissents are considered counterpublic who are equipped to bypass institutions and regimes' official communications (Waisbord 2020).

Equipped with power to produce and share messages about resistance, counterpublics have been blamed for (mis)information, controversial claims, unfounded exaggerations and falsehoods (Brennen et al. 2020; Waisbord 2020). This study builds on Ziccardi (2018), whose research finds that social movements and their uses of digital technologies are revealing the importance of analysing not only the ideologies and the demands of these movements, but also the organizational forms, the (infra)structures and the everyday practices of emergent collectives and networks. The use of social media and digital tools by digital activists has however been associated with vigilant journalism, which has a myopic focus on control, which quickly excludes any concern with care (Bauman and Lyon 2013: 37). Significant criticism has been raised about the failure of digital dissidence to provide caring and ethical forms of digital surveillance possible (Bauman and Lyon 2013: 37). By way of structure, the following section provides a discussion of digital technologies as tools of resistance and the associated criticisms, drawing from the Arab Spring experiences and contextualizing within the cases of Zimbabwe and Belarus. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical framework, which is rooted in Fraser's (1992) subaltern counterpublics argument that citizens use these technologies to develop parallel discursive arenas to challenge and respond to official and dominant ideas. There follows a discussion on the methodological underpinning of the study, which is rooted in a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. This was followed by the study's findings, analysis, conclusion and recommendations.

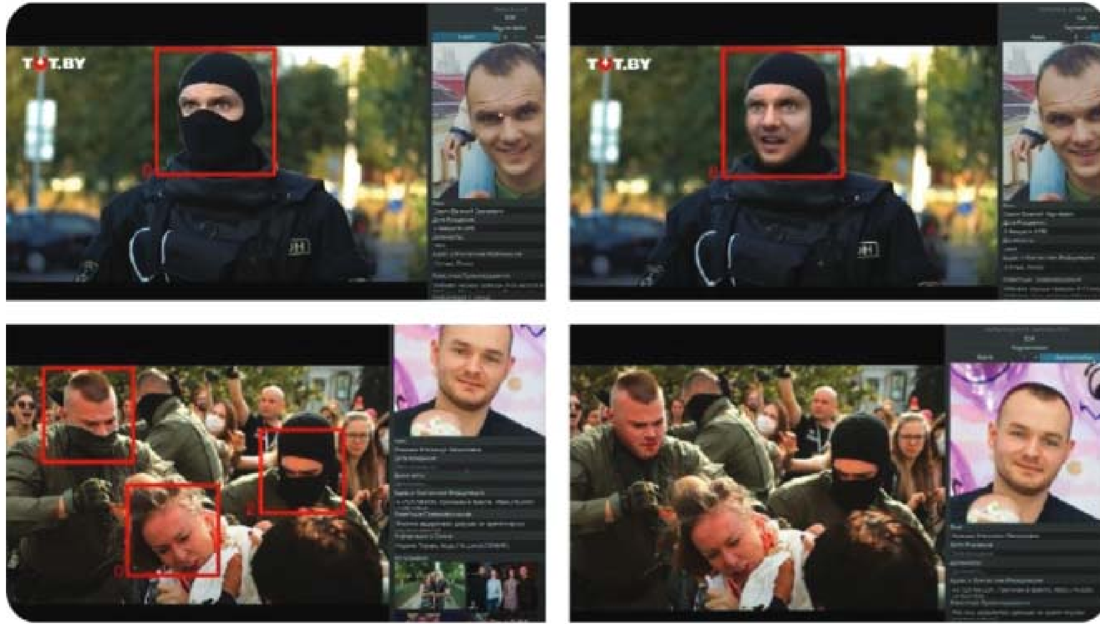

Figure 1: Images showing how artificial intelligence is used to unmask brutal police and reveal their identities. Photographs from @NowBelarus, 25 September 2020.

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES AND RESISTANCE

'Citizens' media result from a complex interaction between people's attempts to democratize the mediascape and their contextual circumstances. Digitization has posed new opportunities for citizens to challenge power and push governments towards democratization trajectories. Events in the Arab Spring, the #BlackLivesMatter protests in the United States and protests in recent years in Zimbabwe reveal the potentially liberating capacity of digital technologies. The Arab Spring, a chain of popular uprisings that swept across the Middle East between 2009 and 2011, saw the emergence of digital dissidence against authoritarian governments (Wagner and Gainous 2013). The Iranian election of June 2009, in which Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was controversially re-elected amidst claims of voter fraud and election irregularities, sparked protests whose success has been partly credited to the liberating power of the internet (Howard 2011: 3; Wagner and Gainous 2013). With an independent network that allowed the distribution of information outside the control of the state, the Iranian uprising was empowered by social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter (Howard 2011). The success of the Iranian protests inspired similar resistance uprisings popularly known as the Arab Spring in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Bahrain. Democratization movements successfully organized and avoided government crackdowns by migrating to the web (Howard et al. 2011). Extant literature on the Arab Spring reflects that the liberating power of the web lies in its ability to create a communication protocol that is difficult to contain, allowing protesters to evade heavy-handed approaches to dissenting voices (Giustozzi 2001). As Fekete and Warf (2013) note, the success of the Arab Spring was hinged on the determinant role of technologies. With widespread access to the internet, social media and hacking software, digital dissidents were introduced to new sources of information and digital organization platforms (Fekete and Warf 2013).

Figure 2: CCTV footage showing the cars used to abduct a protest leader. Photographs from Zimlive, 22 August 2020.

The Arab Spring was significant in proliferating new ways of protesting, which mainly takes place on digital platforms, even in mature democracies like the United States of America. Perhaps one of the most widespread protests in US history, which later spread to other countries across the world, was sparked by the murder of a Black man, George Floyd, by a Minneapolis police officer assisted by his three colleagues on 25 April 2020. The ordeal was captured on camera by a 17-year-old girl who posted the murder on her Facebook page (Malone 2020). Previously, the officer, Derick Chauvin, had escaped eighteen official complaints about his conduct, and the absence of more compelling evidence had worked to his advantage. However, in George Floyd's case, his actions were captured on tape and filmed on a cell phone (Leon 2020). With growing surveillance on human rights abuses across the globe, technology empowered the average citizen to expose police to the type of abhorrent behaviour that had not received much attention in the past (Malone 2020). Extant literature reveals that technology has rewired the criminal justice system and changed the way citizens protest and how the police crackdown on these protests (Leon 2020). While police surveillance on protesters has largely been aided by technology, protesters are appropriating the same technology to counter surveillance mechanisms. The George Floyd protesters managed to evade surveillance by using the image scrubber application, allowing users to scrub faces from protests and remain anonymous (Malone 2020). The efficacy of digital technologies and the internet also lies in their ability to disseminate information about current events. As Howard et al. (2011) contend, they allow for 'scale jumping', the ability to transcend the confining effects of scale. Malone (2020) adds that the internet has the ability to disseminate and equalize practically any information as events of the George Floyd protests have shown. Furthermore, digital activism understood within the context of journalism can help broaden the ideological spectrum for news audiences. The eyewitness reports documented and disseminated through various digital technologies provide a variety of personal points of view, at times contradicting official statements (Nielsen 2012).

Franak Viačorka
@franakviacorka

One of the most brutal units durinç the crackdown in Belarus is the Police Department of fighting Organized Crime. These officers behave like organized crime themselves. They crash cars, windows, beat minors.

Figure 3: Digital influencer Franak Viačorka exposes the leader of a brutal police unit, 25 September 2020.

Recent events in Zimbabwe reveal a gradual negation towards authoritarian rule and a new form of digital authoritarianism to deal with digital dissidents (Mare 2020). The first major test of the power of digital technologies against authoritarianism in Zimbabwe was in 2016 under the late President Robert Mugabe, who had ruled the country since 1980 until the 2017 coup. The shrinking democratic space and declining economy, fuelled by infighting within Mugabe's ruling ZANU-PF party, gave impetus to the emergence of digital activists (Noyes 2020). A local clergy, Evan Mawarire's #ThisFlag and Tajamuka were the key dissident actors who appropriated social media to

criticize the government and rally citizens for a three-day #ShutDown. It can be argued that the success of #ThisFlag movement to shut down major cities across Zimbabwe can be credited to the growth of digital resistance in the post-Mugabe era in which the militarized regime has pushed the limits of freedom (Kademaunga 2019). On 14 January 2019, citizens around Zimbabwe took to the streets to protest against a 150 per cent fuel price hike. The nationwide action was called for by Evan Mawarire, a #ThisFlag activist movement and Peter Mutasa, the head of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) (Chitanana 2020). The government combined physical confrontation with protestors and digital authoritarianism, shutting down the internet to scuttle online citizen engagements (Mare 2020). Digital activists used digital tools such as VPN to bypass the internet blockade, allowing them to communicate via WhatsApp. Also, Telegram emerged as a resilient social media platform at a time

when all the social networks were shut down, as it still offered online access to protesters with little government interference. Eyewitness accounts and photographs collected by regular residents are frequently the only testimony available in authoritarian regimes, and they can significantly influence international perceptions and discourse about these repressive governments.

Despite its successes in offering digital activists tools and platforms to challenge power, the same technologies have shown a potential to be used to undermine democracy and deepen repression in less democratic countries. Hauer (2017) argues that the negative consequences of technological development result from poor use by the people, not of the very nature of technology. During Zimbabwe's 2019 protests, protesters who posted on social media were pursued by the state security apparatus and arrested. In the recent George Floyd protests in America, the police employed artificial intelligence to identify and arrest protestors, therefore deterring protesters from participating. The success of digital activism in bringing about complete socio-political change has been limited (Powell 2022). For example in the Arab Spring, FeesMustFall protest of South Africa and OccupyNigeria, these movements and activism were genetically engineered by other sociopolitical, economic and cultural factors and their relative success cannot be attributed to technology only (Uwalaka and Nwala 2023). According to Olaniyan (2022), protest leaders and movements leverage on sociopolitical and economic issues to push and influence activism. Likewise, Akpojivi (2023) argued that social and digital activism/activists have used these technologies to push their agenda and, in some instances, selfish interests, political and economic contexts, and personalization have hindered these movements from achieving their goals (Akpojivi 2020).

COUNTERING DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM

Despite the celebrated democratizing power of digital technologies, governments are appropriating the same technologies to deal with dissents (Mare 2020). Given these competing uses of technologies between power and activists, the success of digital activism lies in their ability to utilize newer technologies and stay ahead of their government adversaries. Digital technologies have been considered a liberation technology because the internet and its ancillary digital media technologies have an equalizing effect that ordinary citizens take advantage of to counter government control and repression (Howard et al. 2011; Rheingold 1993: 14–15). This technological deterministic view is hamstrung by technologies' ability to undermine authoritarian tendencies by offering new communication channels that are 'fundamentally resistant to state regulation, reducing a state's capacity for repression by hindering its ability to control the flow of information and political communication' (Garrett 2006: 220).

Democracy activists are countering new threats to their safety and security, and it is impossible to completely mitigate them, working either on- or offline. Protesters are resorting to using newer technologies to evade surveillance, such as the open-source uVirtus Linux software, which can serve as a fully encrypted computer operating system by simply plugging in a thumb drive. This software significantly mitigated the risks to people's safety and a movement's operations if their devices were lost or stolen. However, despite these attempts by citizens to use these technologies for resistance, the usage of these technologies has been criticized due to the ability of some people to use these technologies to fuel civil unrest, political instability, digital vigilantism and ethnoreligious crisis (Okoro et al. 2013). Trottier (2017) defines digital vigilantism as a user-led violation of privacy that transcends online/offline distinctions and complicates relations of visibility and control between police and the public. For instance, during the protest against the murder of George Floyd by the police in the United States, vigilant groups recorded incidents of police abuse on protesters. In Eswatini, where pro-democracy groups are resisting King Mswati's monarchy, vigilant groups employed a 'naming and shaming' type of visibility which involves sharing the targeted individual's personal details, address,

work details and any sensitive information on social media platforms. While digital vigilantism hopes to bring conventional justice through police or other legal channels (Favarel-Garrigues et al. 2020), as well as unconventional justice such as online and offline harassment of the abusers, it has not proved to be effective in authoritarian governments where the state often sanctions such actions.

Figure 4: Digital influencer Professor Jonathan Moyo reveals the identity of a state security agent who abducted protest leader Tawanda Muchehiwa, 28 August 2020.

CONTEXTUAL OVERVIEW

Despite being under authoritarian rule since independence in 1991, Belarus has largely been peaceful (Samorukov 2020). The people of Belarus had allowed President Lukashenko to retain the presidency because of his initial successes in stabilizing the economy and creating employment that they were prepared to ignore his repression of political opponents, open rigging of elections and censorship of the press (Samorukov 2020). With Belarus experiencing a declining economy in recent years, Lukashenko's obsolete governing methods and his refusal to listen to the government's proposal for broader economic reforms resulted in the growth of an anti-Lukashenko sentiment among the country's young population (Congressional Research Services 2020; Samorukov 2020).

On 9 August 2020, Belarus held its presidential election amid the global COVID-19 pandemic and an election in which Lukashenko had pushed for a sixth term. Ahead of the elections, Lukashenko was barred from running and jailed on dubious charges by all noteworthy opponents. Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, the wife of the imprisoned blogger and would-be presidential candidate Sergei Tikhanovskiy, was the only oppositionist permitted to run in the election (Samorukov 2020). Ultimately, the absence of real opponents transformed the 9th August vote into a referendum on Lukashenko’s rule. With a single campaign pledge to hold a new, free and fair election in the event of her victory, Tikhanovskaya’s message resonated with disparate parts of society. It forced the authorities to resort to blatant vote-rigging to guarantee Lukashenko’s victory (Rácz et al. 2020). Lukashenko won the election with an 80 per cent margin, but citizens, opposition supporters and election observers felt the election was unfree and unfair (Reichardt and Stępniewski 2020). Few gave credence to the official results.

An unprecedented wave of social protests against the regime of Alexander Lukashenko followed the announcement of the results. Although the protests, demonstrations and strikes were generally peaceful, the government responded with brute force, beatings and detaining thousands of protesters (Rácz et al. 2020). It can be argued that popular uprisings in the United States and other parts of the world in protest of the murder of George Floyd, coupled with the lack of a coherent COVID-19 policy and fatigue of staying under COVID-19 lockdown energized Belarusians to resist President Lukashenko’s rigged election victory.

Authoritarian consolidation in Zimbabwe was initiated in the early 1990s when the late former President Robert Mugabe attempted to institute a one-party state (Saunders 2000). Facing resistance from the opposition, the working class and civil society, Mugabe abandoned the one-party state agenda but began to limit the democratic space (Raftopoulos and Mlambo 2009). Until his removal from office in a military-backed civilian protest in November 2017, Mugabe had stifled democratic space, limited media freedom and retained office through electoral rigging and violence (Chimbu 2004; Moyo 2011). The post-Mugabe administration has failed to bring meaningful democratic reforms (Pigou 2017). With inflation rising to 500 per cent in 2020, massive unemployment and unprecedented corruption by the politically privileged fuelled public anger. The COVID-19 pandemic opened the floodgates of corruption involving COVID-19 equipment tender, prompting citizens to organize countrywide demonstrations on 31 July under the hashtags #CorruptionMustFall and #BringBackOurMoney. The state security apparatus responded with abductions, arrests and torture of the organizers of the protests weeks before the date. With many protest organizers either arrested, abducted, tortured or in hiding, the protest could not take off. However, the closure of offline spaces for protest pushed Zimbabweans to social media under a new hashtag, #ZimbabweanLivesMatter, as they rallied fellow Zimbabweans and the world to monitor the gross human rights abuses committed by the state. They shared pictures and videos of activists who had been abducted, police violence on innocent activists and revealed identities of the state security officers used to commit human rights abuses.

SUBALTERN COUNTERPUBLICS

Fraser defined counterpublics as ‘parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs’ (1990: 67). Counterpublics can also be understood as the subalterns, who are in a perpetual struggle with power and their ideological apparatus. For this study, the state-controlled media are mouthpieces of the dominant ideas of those in power. Due to the partisan reportage of the state media (Chuma 2010), ordinary citizens find it hard to accept the authenticity of the reportage on protests. For Downey and Fenton (2003), this

alternative public sphere is a space of 'anti-publicness'. It acknowledges the instances of intentional political mobilization that seek to challenge narratives in the mass-media public sphere (Kubin and von Sikorski 2021). Therefore, social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube have become convenient counterpublic spheres.

Eldridge II (2019) regards digital activists as interlopers who are seen outside the journalistic field, contesting being labelled as outsiders by emphasizing their capacity to gather and report news, hold political and corporate powers to account and report to and for their public. In Zimbabwe, these peripheral actors have emerged in numbers in recent years, spurred by new technological developments and diminished trust in a partisan state-controlled media. They have occupied the cyber sphere as bloggers, programmers, amateur journalists and content producers (Nielsen 2012; Tandoc and Oh 2017). For instance, in Zimbabwe, Twitter Blog Team Pachedu, formed a few months before the 2018 elections, documented electoral fraud committed by the ruling ZANU-PF and activists aligned with it. The research design for this study explicitly conceives Twitter as a counterpublic space that challenges official discourse (dominant publics who speak through state media and government-administered Twitter handles) (Toepfl and Piwoni 2018).

METHODOLOGY

Data for this study was gathered from selected Twitter hashtags on Belarus and Zimbabwean protests. Data was collected from 20 July 2020 to 30 September 2020 for the Zimbabwean protest and from 10 August to 30 September 2020 for the Belarusian protests. From Belarus, the #Belarus and #Lukashenko were selected from which information from across cyberspace about the Belarus protests was shared. For the Zimbabwean context, data was gathered on the Twitter hashtag #ZimbabwenLivesMatter, which coalesced against state repression of the 1 July 2020 protest against corruption of COVID-19 funds and growing levels of poverty. For this study, the choice of Twitter in gathering data was inspired by its popularity and efficacy in protests. A recent survey reveals that there are 386 million Twitter users globally and 152 million daily users in 2020 (Clement 2023). One of the reasons digital activists choose Twitter in mediating protests is that the dialogue is profound, meaningful and appears to impact those participating (Stever and Lawson 2013). The hashtag facility on Twitter is advantageous as it enables users to collect similar tweets and their subjects according to the frequency of use and relevance. This facility allows users to quickly and easily have insight into a wide range of tweets that are connected with specific topics (Bruns et al. 2012: 23). In authoritarian states like Belarus and Zimbabwe, where violence by the state is often used as an instrument to disrupt protests, hashtags allow users to virtually gather and discuss trending topics and events (Bruns et al. 2012: 24).

This study employed systematic sampling on trending Belarus and Zimbabwean protest hashtags, selecting only tweets that resonated with the focus of the research. In analysing data, qualitative content analysis was employed. According to Roller and Lavrakas, qualitative content analysis refers to 'the systematic reduction of content, analysed with particular attention to the context in which it was created, to identify themes and extract meaningful interpretations of the data' (2015: 232). As guided by the research's focus, data related to appropriating digital technologies to uncover human rights violations by the state and the identity of the agents in Belarus and Zimbabwe was purposely selected and analysed.

FINDINGS

In Belarus, the security apparatus used a heavy-handed approach to deal with anti-Lukashenko protests that started in the capital city of Minsk but quickly spread to other parts of the country. The

security machinery, known as OMON, wore face masks or balaclavas to hide their identities from the protesters. To resist state violence, Belarusian digital activists created an application using artificial intelligence to reveal the identities of these masked government forces. The information that consisted of their names, addresses and telephone numbers was added to the blacklist published on websites documenting abuses committed by security forces during the protests. One of the resilient websites which survived the government shutdown of protest websites is Nexta, which released thousands of names of police officers who lived in Brest who were violent to protesters.

This study finds that with technology at their disposal, digital activists in Belarus were able to expose agents of police brutality, making the future quest for justice possible. The exposures deterred the police from resorting to the use of force while empowering protesters to take advantage of that restraint. Technology has rewired the criminal justice system around the world and changing the way people protest (Leon 2020). Leon adds that with increasing police brutality to suppress protests, these digital tools are more important than ever. Technology has offered democracy activists an opportunity to find smart ways of resistance. Technology is the main factor behind the social changes that exist in the society (Raharjo et al. 2018).

In Zimbabwe, the 31 July 2020 demonstrations triggered by rampant corruption of COVID-19 equipment funds and a declining economy were thwarted by the police and state security agents who employed two methods, abductions of protest leaders and violence on pockets of protests. One of the victims of the state of abduction is Tawanda Muchehiwa, a university student activist who is related to the editor of the online newspaper Zimlive who had exposed the COVID-gate scandal. The editor had gone into hiding when his name appeared on the police wanted list of protest leaders. In a move viewed as an attempt to punish him, the state security agents abducted Muchehiwa, and tortured him for three days before dumping him by the roadside with life-threatening injuries. While the state was denying their involvement in Muchehiwa's abduction, CCTV footage emerged which captured the whole abduction incident. A vehicle rented to the state security department by a Harare-based car rental company had been used for the abduction in Bulawayo, about 450 km from Harare.

As argued by Raharjo et al. (2018) technology is seen as a means of liberation, a media of democracy and participation, and can realize human autonomy, the availability of CCTV footage presented a huge turning point in exposing the abductions which the state had previously blamed on a third force. The registration number on one of the cars used was tracked to a car rental company called Impala Car Rentals based in Harare. They acknowledged renting the car but refused to reveal the identity of the client, thus exposing the state security department's involvement. It is important to note that although the police deliberately ignored the abduction case, the exposure of the abduction agents offers a possibility for justice against the perpetrators in future.

ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN COUNTERING AUTHORITARIANISM

The study finds that digital dissidents appropriated social media platforms to expose and amplify messages on the brutality of state security apparatus on protesters. In Belarus during the anti-Lukashenko protests, the state disabled the internet and social media platforms except for virtual private networks Telegram and Psiphone, which the protesters used to share photos and videos of police brutality to other social media platforms such as Twitter. The Belarusian diaspora was influential in amplifying the human rights violation exposures and discussion around them by a global audience. Digital influencers took advantage of their huge social base to disseminate protest information. One of the key digital influencers who gathered information about police brutality and shared it on his Twitter account is journalist Franak Viačorka. As Harlow (2012) argues, Web 2.0 has enabled social

networking sites to become an important tool for social movements to gain hold and to rally people to support offline protest by sharing videos and photos of state brutality thus stirring public anger.

In Zimbabwe, the security agents who had been used in the abductions of 31 July protest leaders and even before were exposed on social media through informants who shared the images with digital influencers. One prominent figure to emerge was exiled former ZANU-PF minister Professor Jonathan Moyo, who posted on his Twitter account the names and images of state security agents used for the abductions and torture of democracy activists.

The study establishes that social media could counter the state's use of terror and abductions to stifle demonstrations by creating a public sphere on which the terror agents were unmasked, thus making them and their families insecure and discouraging the state from resorting to coercive tactics. Obach (2004) opines that in social protest movements, information channels and the flow of resources depend on connections and associations between the actors of movements. The internet facilitates this transfer process, increasing the initiatives of various types. Ziccardi (2013) adds that social networks combine in a very practical way people of different profiles and ideas, who are looking for change, and reduce barriers to mobilization. To show the efficacy of Twitter in broadcasting information to a wider audience locally and internationally, the world joined Zimbabweans under the hashtag #ZimbabweanLivesMatter, challenging the government to stop the use of violence and abductions and allow Zimbabweans to demonstrate freely.

CITIZEN JOURNALISTS AND THE MOBILE PHONE

In authoritarian regimes where violence is used as an instrument of suppression of dissent, the mobile phone plays a critical role in taking stock of these abuses so that the perpetrators are exposed. In an attempt to limit international scrutiny on human rights violations on protesters, the Belarusian government banned many international news agencies from covering protests (Aljazeera 2020). This study finds that citizen journalists filled the void and appropriated the mobile phone to capture police brutality in video and pictures before sharing them across the cyberspace. Oser et al. (2022) argue that even the very architecture of the internet, through end-to-end communication, decentralization of processing power to the 'edge' computers and separation of transport protocols and applications, has enabled it to become a tool for widespread political participation and innovation. In one of the abuses captured on mobile phone by a protester (Figure 1), a police officer violently pulls a protester's hair while she desperately tries to free herself.

In another trending picture shared on Twitter, an OMON police officer stands beside a victim of police violence following a protest on 10 August 2020. Although the pictured officer was hiding behind a balaclava, the exposure of his identity by digital activists is sufficient to hold the police accountable for the use of violence on protesters. With internet connectivity blocked by the government during the protests, the mobile phone remained essential in capturing police brutality through pictures and videos. Through coordination with fellow Belarusians outside the country, citizens found a way of letting the world know the scale of violence and expose police's liability in the human rights violations. A 22-year-old Belarusian Stephan Svetlov living in Poland was instrumental in coordinating the Belarus protests through digital tools. He received photos and videos of police brutality from fellow citizens and shared them on his blog and helped protestors on how to assemble and counter the police. The role of digital activists in repressive environments is underscored by Ziccardi (2013) who argues that the digital dissident directly opposes the repressive technology locally, in the context in which it is located, or from abroad, in a context with which he/she nonetheless makes contact with the repressive situation and technology.

This study finds that the mobile phone has shifted the arena for protests from the streets to cyberspace, thus circumventing the state's control of the flow of information on traditional media. Protesters were able to use their mobile phones to record police brutality as 'direct viewers' and 'witnesses' (Bromberg 2013: 47), then shared and posted to their social media audience. This has enabled social movements to galvanize local and global solidarity and facilitate debate for a smaller cost than with traditional communications (Bromberg 2013).

In Zimbabwe, the state has previously succeeded in denying its involvement in the abductions of protesters because of a lack of evidence. However, as Bromberg (2013) notes, technology can be used to generate change. In response to the involvement of a car rental company in the abduction of protest organizer Tawanda Muchehiwa, a fellow university student Denford Ngadziore protested at the car rental company in the form of a press conference 100 m away from their premises. In the midst of his presentation, he was abducted by a member of the state intelligence department which is secretly known as Ferret Forces. He was tortured and later dumped by the roadside after several hours. The whole abduction was recorded by some journalists and ordinary citizens on their mobile phones. Although the state agent was wearing a mask, his identity was easily traced through the registration details of his abduction car which the protesters pictured. While the police were reluctant to act on the abduction, the availability of evidence shared on social media was effective in drawing the attention of the international community and human rights organizations.

Figure 5: An OMON police is captured dragging a protester while wielding a baton. Photograph from @PrayForBelarus, 12 August 2020.

Heilbroner (1994) opines that machines make history. This description can be used to argue for the efficacy of the mobile phone in changing the protest landscape and empowering protestors. The immediate results of digital activists' appropriation of the mobile phone to unmask the agents of state brutality on demonstrators under an authoritarian environment may not be seen, but there is a possibility of justice if they succeed in pushing for democratic change, thus dismantling authoritarianism.

CONCLUSION

Technology is shaping the character of protests in authoritarian environments as it offers democracy activists new digital avenues to counter offline and digital authoritarianism. This study finds that protesters in Belarus and Zimbabwe appropriated available technologies as a way of resistance to

expose state brutality. Ziccardi (2013) opines that digital activists combat a situation that they find unacceptable with intensive use of technology. They resist authoritarianism using every means available such as the use of social media, blogs, websites and applications to expose state brutality on protesters. Understanding digital activists as counterpublics established that protesters are driven to appropriate digital technologies to expose state brutality to keep a record for future justice and deter the state from using violent tactics on protesters while allowing them to gain ground. Being cost-effective and easily accessible, digital technologies are emerging as effective in breaking the limits of state control of information, exposing human rights abuses by state agents as digital activists appropriate them to galvanize local and international solidarity in cyberspace. Also, using these technologies, the protesters have developed parallel discursive arenas to push their ideologies that are often overlooked, ignored and suppressed by the state, and they counter the dominant ideology of the state. The potential of digital technologies as liberating technologies (Diamond 2010) present some optimism for protesters in Belarus and Zimbabwe that successful resistance to authoritarianism and justice on human rights violations on protesters is a possibility. However, such success is dependent on the agency and broader sociopolitical, economic and cultural issues in which the activists use these technologies.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Wishes Tendayi Mututwa is a post-doctoral research fellow at University of Pretoria, South Africa. His research interests are in non-professional journalism, digital activism and social networks.

Contact: University of Pretoria, P.O. Box 14679, Hatfield, 0028, South Africa.

E-mail: wishesmtutwa@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9814-463X

Ufuoma Akpojivi is the policy, research and learning lead at advocates for International Development, United Kingdom. Prior to this, he was an associate professor at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa, and a visiting professor at the School of Media and Communication, Pan-Atlantic University, Nigeria. He is a C2-rated researcher of the National Research Foundation (NRF) South Africa, and his research interests cut across new media and citizenship, activism, political communication and media policy.

Contact: A4ID, The Green House, 244-254 Cambridge Heath Road, London E2 9DA, UK.
E-mail: ufuoma.akpojivi@a4id.org