



TECHNOLOGIES AND POWER DYNAMICS IN WOMEN'S PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPHERES

By Fungai Machirori

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I once gave a keynote address at a symposium held in Zimbabwe on the role that social media can play in building various sectors of Zimbabwean society. Having started up Her Zimbabwe, a web-based platform for Zimbabwean women in 2012, it felt good to be part of an event that acknowledged the role that social media is playing – and will continue to play – in our lives as Zimbabweans. The force of the Internet is unstoppable, and it is important to have discussions about how best to harness its potential for the causes that we champion.

And yet as I looked through the programme of presenters and innovators speaking at this symposium, one thing struck me. As in most aspects of public life, there was a dearth of female representation with only two of the programme's main presenters – out of more than 10 – being women.

Where are Zimbabwe's women in social media, I asked myself? Have modern technological innovations effectively silenced us? Is the patriarchal status quo under any real threat, or is social media aiding and abetting its perpetuation? The following paper will seek to answer these questions while positioning the promise of modern technologies within a context-specific paradigm.

Cyberfeminism

Initially encouraging 'techno-utopian' expectations, cyberfeminism – feminism as it relates to cyberspace and women's appropriation of new media tools for self and collective empowerment – had prophesied a new world for women; a world which would offer them a chance to create more equitable platforms and modes of interaction and communication, thus nurturing an emancipatory environment to fight and end patriarchal hegemony. But more recently, cyberfeminism – the school of thought encompassing the intersectionalities of feminist rhetoric, modern technologies, identity and power – has had to undergo some serious re-evaluation.

In the cyberfeminist utopia, modern technologies, particularly the Internet, would allow for the full expression of the fluidity of women's identities. The cyborg, as popularised by the work of Donna Haraway in the 1980s, would be a fusion of flesh and machine, blurring the lines between the material body and the digital realm. In this 'third space', pre-existent hierarchies – of race, class, gender, for instance – would be eliminated to make way for new formulations of identity and 'self'.

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But through the realisation that modern technologies have offered little space for women to claim full use and control of their potential, such optimistic perspectives on new technologies have become tempered with considerable cynicism.

Market leaders in innovative technological sectors remain male-led companies. In fact, according to a recent research study on companies in Silicon Valley, the famed US headquarters of technological innovation, only 3 percent of the technological firms in the area were founded by women.¹ Additionally, the largest social networking platforms – such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr and LinkedIn – were all founded by men. And where women are visible, a great burden rests on their shoulders. An example is Marissa Mayer, who has been CEO of Yahoo! for less than a year and who has come under intense public scrutiny for, among other things, taking a two-week maternity break and banning employees from working from home – a move that angered the mothers of young children since the decision no longer allowed them the flexibility to work from home and take care of their children.

Ironically, given women's underrepresentation in social media leadership, global statistics show that women generally make up the largest share of social media users. In a 2012 US study² of women's use of social media, women were shown to be overall leaders in the use of social media across various sites and said to be five times more likely than men to use Pinterest, one of fastest growing platforms globally. Pinterest is a social media site that has largely leveraged itself through appealing to women's perceived normative domestic pursuits, such as cookery and fashion. It has come under fire from some feminists for peddling 'kitchen porn', placing unrealistic expectations of domesticity and beauty on women and therefore reinforcing patriarchy through 'trivialising' women's interests and catering narrowly to the private sphere of women's interactions.

The arguments against women's wholesale uptake of Pinterest echo the body of western feminist rhetoric that places a premium on women's movement from more private and domestic

spheres of interaction into more public, male-dominated and politicised spaces. As Hassanin³ articulates, "Domesticity is the whole package of life that does not fit into the ideal worker's terms of reference, i.e. raising children, household duties, social duties that interfere with paid work, and so forth."

The debate is therefore not only about whether women own social media and technological innovations. But it is also about what they are using them for. Indeed, have Facebook, Pinterest and other sites provided the emancipatory cyberfeminist promise for women to explore the fluidity of their identities? Or have they merely served to further entrench women's position on the margins of public discourse? In essence, it appears that a limited range of interests and pursuits have been packaged and marketed to women, by men, so much so that the dominant use and consumption of social media lies with women, while ownership and innovation remains the preserve of men.

Women of the global south

But these generalisations about women's use of social media cannot be made across all women and across various global contexts. For the majority of women of the global south, use of the Internet still remains perilously low and knowledge of sites such as Pinterest, Facebook and Twitter remains privileged. While the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) has passed a resolution supporting freedom of expression via the Internet as a basic human right to be guaranteed and protected by nation states, this remains an unmet goal, particularly for the women of the global south.

According to a recent report produced by the US-based chip-making giant, Intel⁴, 23 percent fewer women than men are online in the global south, representing 200 million fewer women than men online today. In sub-Saharan Africa, the figure expands to 45 percent fewer women being online than men.

It is well documented that women who have access to online skills and resources derive various social, economic and political opportunities. For example, they are able to sell their wares online and to extract important information about individual and collective health and governance. And yet women face many barriers to participation in the online space, including the costs of connectivity, lower levels of literacy (and so computer literacy), and curtailments on their mobility and therefore their ability to visit spaces such as cyber cafes to acquire Internet skills.

While mobile phones have been touted as one of the foremost solutions to the African woman's connectivity woes, it is also known that she is 24 percent less likely to own a phone than a man. Across the nations of the global south, there are 300 million fewer female mobile phone subscribers than male ones.⁵

However, it is no wonder that women's use of the Internet is so heavily proscribed. Zimbabwe's Demographic Health Survey (ZDHS) findings⁶ for 2010-11 revealed that 67 percent of rural women and 45 percent of male rural respondents reported having no exposure to any form of mass media (radio, television and newspapers) at least once a week, compared with 21 percent of urban women and 13 percent of urban men. This means that a significant proportion of Zimbabwe's population, particularly those who are rural-based and already marginal in many other ways, is going without any exposure to traditional media, let alone the Internet.

Note what Buskens and Webb had to say (2009: 4)⁷, "It is... generally recognised that the nature and direction of the information society's development is not grounded in the realities of women, particularly women who experience poverty as well as gender discrimination, and who do not hold positions of power in the public realm." In essence, what the Internet and modern technologies are doing for some women is to further push them towards the margins of society, adding to the discriminatory factors that are already working against their development.

While access in nations of the global south is markedly different to access in western nations, one key similarity in the gendered use of modern technologies does exist – a lack of access to the spaces where men create and cultivate the knowledge and skills that enable them to perpetuate patriarchy and power.

A qualitative study⁸ on gendered computer use conducted at the University of Zimbabwe proved that access to computers on campus, even when it was said to be egalitarian, revealed gendered biases towards male students. As most of the postgraduate students involved in the study did not have access to a personal computer, there was a heavy reliance upon campus computer facilities to carry out research and type out assignments. However, female students were consistently in the minority of computer facility users, peaking at 19 percent representation, even though they constituted 51 percent of the total enrolment.

While the computer facilities were offered on a 'first come, first served' basis, what this policy glossed over was the reality of the challenges that female students faced in being the first to be served – for instance, coming to campus late due to domestic duties and leaving early for the same reasons.

This lack of a consistent claim to the online space means that most women interact with modern technologies less frequently – and therefore less confidently – than men. And when they do gain access – as with examples from the West – their interests are often limited to a range of stereotypical feminised roles.

The urban tech savvy: Our hope for Africa?

Of the 10 African countries with the highest Internet market penetration, only one – Morocco with 53 percent – can boast that more than half of its population is able to access the Internet.⁹ Yet we have seen how people in some countries, such as Tunisia (39 percent) and Egypt (34 percent), have harnessed the power of the Internet and social media to oppose – and indeed help overthrow – tyrannical governance systems during the Arab Spring uprisings. Facilitated by young, tech savvy North Africans' use of social media, these uprisings are widely regarded as having initially helped to bridge many of the divides, including religious and political differences, between participants.

A significant proportion of urbanites are online in Africa today. Vast numbers of communal and personal blogs abound in Africa's cyberspace with many turning to social media – and citizen journalism – to recount their personal experiences of Africa, gender, politics, identity and many other societal constructions. While these bloggers and activists do not represent the totality of women and men on the continent – since they are very often highly educated and enjoy access to various resources (expendable income, decent Internet connectivity, social capital and others) – what they have begun to do is to create an online space to interrogate and reposition African norms and traditions, and therefore the broader discourse.

Describing the fluidity and flexibility of female African bloggers' writing from a study she conducted, Somolu (2007: 481)¹⁰ notes, "It became apparent that...in describing everyday experiences, the bloggers were writing from their perspectives as women living in Africa. Some of the frustrations they experienced and wrote about were clearly shared by many other women (for example, cultural expectations of women's roles in life, sexual harassment from men, pressure on women to look attractive, societal pressure on women to marry before the age of 30), as these posts tended to generate many responses and much discussion, particularly from other women."

Mainstream media continues to marginalize women's voices in relation to public discourse. By 2009, men constituted 59 percent of employees in media houses in southern Africa.¹¹ When South Africa, which accounted for over half the employees in the sample was excluded, the number of women working in media houses fell to just 32 percent. Zimbabwe has the lowest figure in the region – with just 13 percent female representation.

It is this lack of representativeness, as well as disenchantment with the partisan nature of the mainstream news media that

led me to blogging four years ago as a means to regain ownership and control over my narratives. Through my uncensored explorations, I have been able to unpack taboos about the vagina, abortion, homosexuality and a variety of other themes, as well as to initiate discussions with women who would ordinarily cower from such talk. Many young Zimbabwean female bloggers has also found their own spaces online with prominent voices such as those of human rights lawyer, Rumbidzai Dube, who unpacks Zimbabwe's legislative environment from a feminist perspective, and Delta Milayo Ndou, who in a conversational manner deconstructs life, love and everything else. In these spaces, women are instigators of important discussions about the issues that affect them, other women, and men.

Another factor that enables conversations, particularly those of a sensitive nature that can expose women to harm, is the protection of anonymity that online space can provide. For instance, one of Zimbabwe's most vibrant political dissension spaces, Sokwanele, remains anonymous, thereby allowing its moderators to expose issues and express opinions, which go against the conservative status quo.

Furthermore, as Afropolitanism – a neologism combining the African identity with cosmopolitanism and projecting a worldview that espouses an urban and culturally savvy African identity – continues to gain purchase across the continent and beyond, an emergent diasporic voice is speaking up and decrying the notion that Africans who are online and blogging are merely advancing an elitist, and therefore self-indulgent, agenda.

One of those voices is Minna Salami's. Blogging at Ms Afropolitan, she wrote a piece entitled 'Who is an African woman?', which included the following statement; 'I'm tired of people immediately assuming that to blog about African women is to blog about charity work. I'm tired of this idea that African women can only be objects of pity. I'm tired of the notion that African women can or should only interact on select topics'.

So whose voice should be allowed to speak on behalf of African women's issues, bearing in mind that the

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- MS AFROPOLITAN

continent is home to women of a variety of races, classes, tribes, and a disparity of social, political and economic leverage?

For a continent with a multitude of challenges, blogging to articulate one's identity or opinions may seem trifling. And yet this represents a necessary means for women to enter the public sphere and express their personal and collective concerns and aspirations, as well as to bring often-private discussions out into the public realm, where they can be debated and critiqued by women and men as the conveyors of culture.

There are many different Africas and many different ways to be African, which intersect with a variety of issues and circumstances that need to be deconstructed progressively and documented digitally. As Delta Milayo Ndou posits, "If we were to wait until every woman had access to ICTs before recommending blogging as an empowerment tool, we'd be like idiots who do nothing because they feel that what they could do is too little."

Her Zimbabwe, the platform that I coordinate, has a mandate that resonates with Ndou's words. The platform does not presume to be the solution to women's Internet access and connectivity woes. Instead, it positions itself as a space where women who are online can connect and build an online feminist network and solidarity. It also harnesses the power of sharing personal and alternatives narratives about Zimbabwean women's lives. But we must remain cognisant about the power dynamics that this online – and therefore exclusionary – solidarity is at risk of creating.

With more information and knowledge becoming accessible online, a lack of access to online resources and networks for some means that this new feminist model of organising will omit women in the offline sphere if no conscious efforts are made to link back to them. Ultimately, such schisms among women enable the patriarchal structuring of society to perpetuate itself upon the divisiveness among women.

'Clicktivism' and 'slacktivism'

But online organising and activism face other challenges. 'Slacktivism' – a neologism combining slackness and activism – is a term that is increasingly being used to describe online activity. Do the petitions and advocacy messages and clicks to like and share help to actually make a difference to real people's lives?

In her cautioning against use of the word, Mary Joyce¹³ notes, "Slacktivism conveys the image of the lazy activist, a politically active person who decides to sign an e-petition rather than attend a street rally. Though it is indeed easier to join a Facebook group or make an online donation than to canvass door-to-door or participate in a sit-in, this choice rarely occurs in the real world. The politically active will be active both online and offline. They have found a new realm for their action. The politically inactive would never have canvassed or participated in a sit-in in the first place. Click and something changes or sign an online petition and something will happen."

Those who are online championing causes are often the same people who are offline running campaigns, but the challenge for activists remains how to get online audiences to champion causes beyond the few minutes that their attention is held captive by an attractive website or page. A clear strategy and framework for merging offline and online spheres is much needed in women's organising so as to ensure equitable division of labour and benefits.

Conclusion

When we speak of modern technologies, we need to unpack the array of issues that these bring not only from a standpoint of women's consumption, but also their production and innovation. It is only through such a holistic approach that the real promises and shortcomings of these technologies can be evaluated.

But ultimately, we need to remain cognisant of the fact that modern technologies are neither the destination, nor the end – but rather a means to the destination. Modern technologies can both help and hinder progress in reducing gender inequities. They can create new forms of marginalization and harm through cyber violence and by widening the gaps and dichotomies between rural and urban women, while at the same time leveraging space for women's lives and stories to be shared and acted upon.

The utopian ideals of cyberfeminism have long since been cast aside. But there is still much hope for cyberfeminism to thrive in a world where we can live both in our material bodies and in the fluidity of cyberspace. The onus is upon us as African women to use these new media tools for our own good and to marry the online space with the work that we have begun in the offline realm.





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