

Experiences of Zimbabweans in the diaspora towards social media shutdown during #shutdownZimbabwe2019

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Abstract

Zimbabwe continues to dissipate into continuities of political, social, and economic turmoil since the departure of former president, Robert Mugabe, after a military intervention in November 2017, and the subsequent closely contested harmonised elections nine months later. This article presents new evidence on the experiences of Zimbabweans living in the diaspora towards #shutdownZimbabwe2019 when the government shut down social media. Drawing on data from in-depth interviews, participant observations and Netnography, I show that the shutdown had social effects on Zimbabweans in the diaspora.

Key words: social impact; social media; protest; shutdown; Zimbabwe diaspora; Zimbabwe

1. Introduction

This article examines the experiences of selected Zimbabweans living in the diaspora after then Minister of State Security Owen Ncube had evoked the Interception of Communications Act (ICA) of 2007, to shut down internet services following the Shutdown Zimbabwe campaign in January 2019. The study is in the broader literature on the (re)curing post 2000 period. The post-2000 period in Zimbabwe is generally regarded as a crisis period (Mhiripiri and Ureke, 2019). The study casts the problem in the so called 'New dispensation' pronounced by President Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa. Importantly, the study locates the discourse in the social media, regulation, and impact on the everyday lives of Zimbabweans who migrated to the diaspora largely because of the crisis.

Most Zimbabweans in the diaspora, as economic and political immigrants, largely use relatively affordable social media platforms – WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter - and intermittently, expensive phone calls, for social interactions to keep ties with their families back home. With the advent of video calling on some of these platforms, the new technology reduced the distance, temporarily butting away feelings of isolation, seclusion, anxiety and loneliness from family, friends, and relatives for many diasporas. Unfortunately, during #shutdownZimbabwe 2019, the government, through the Minister of State Security in the Office of the President, directed that the five network providers – Econet, Telecel, Netone, Africom and Telone – to cut off these essential forms of communication following a nationwide citizen stayaway-cum-protest. Drawing on the social impacts of social media including improved social communication (Anderson and Jiang, 2018; Alabdulkareem, 2015; Ngai et al., 2015; Li and Sakamoto, 2014; Sawyer and Guo-Ming, 2012; O'Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson, 2011) and social media use, (Bosch, 2013; Hew, 2011; Junco, 2013; Mare, 2015; Ozkul and Humphreys, 2015), this article presents new evidence on the experiences of

Zimbabweans in the diaspora towards social media shutdown in 2019. The article draws on the Social Aspects Theory - a collective term comprising all social factors such as social influence, which includes social identity and social capital (social interaction and social ties) (Ngai et al., 2015:34) to assess the social impact of social media shutdown. The ambition is to examine the social experiences of social media shutdown on parents in the diaspora who have their children in Zimbabwe. This article does not focus on the experiences of people in Zimbabwe as the impacts on their everyday life seem evident and does not make a case for the use of social media in buttressing political participation.

African governments are increasingly disrupting protests and stayaways organised through social media by shutting down social networks. Such responses have been instituted by seemingly authoritarian governments in Egypt, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Zimbabwe is the most recent country to take such measures. In these countries, citizens seem more worried about the political and economic impacts of the shutdown within the country involved (Bowman and Camp, 2013). Bowman and Camp further contend that internet is usually disrupted in situations of popular uprising as happened in Egypt to suppress rebellion. The authors argue that states shutdown social media because protesters use it as a 'tool of revolution' (Bowman and Camp, 2012: 12). Social media shutdown also impacts on political expression, reduces channels and quality of political participation (Harsch, 2011). The impact of internet and social media shutdown in the case of Egypt traversed from socially disconnecting people within the country and from the outside world to business devastation (economic impact) due to cut off electronic transactions and crippled banking system (Bowman and Camp, 2012:6). Hussaini (2011) reports that the Egyptian government blocked access to Twitter and Facebook to cut information transfer between protesters. This literature focuses on government motivation – repressing political activism - to cut off internet and social media access. The literature is also explicit on the social impact of the shutdown on communication between netizens – persons actively involved in internet use – particularly within the country. There is less focus on social impacts of social media blackout on netizens in the diaspora particularly on parents in the diaspora with children back home.

Equally, there is growing scholarship on the use and impacts of social media on different aspects of people's lives, with a revealing underplay of the social impacts. Sloan and Quan-Haase (2017, 387) argue that 'Social media affect us, our economies, political systems and our private lives.' Some studies argue that social media plays a fundamental role in engaging citizens in democratic processes, particularly civic and political action (Bennett, 2012; Mare, 2015; Zhang et al., 2010). Social media has empowered citizens to challenge their oppressive governments (Yang, 2013, 726). It is increasing becoming the 'a new breath for representative democracy and politics' at subnational level (Sobaci and Hatipoğlu, 2018, v). Collective protest action in the Arab Springs, for instance, is disputably attributed to the use of social media (Howard and Park, 2012; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013). Similarly, tech-savvy protesters arguably used Twitter to organise during the popular 2009 'Twitter Revolution' (Schechtman, 2009). Others are preoccupied with showing the power of social media in mobilising protests (Gukurume, 2017) or in mediating 'digital activism' (Mutsvairo, 2016). Evidence suggests that social media platforms, Facebook for example, have been effectively used as political campaign tools (Borah, 2014). Platforms such as MySpace have become useful alternative communication mediums in elections (Gueorguieva, 2007). In the case of the United States, government shutdown of the internet and such platforms, Yang (2013) argues, is repressive, upsets civil liberties and has economic consequences.

A growing scholarship focuses on the benefits of increasing use of social media. The internet digital age has power to make people network and connect for happiness through social media (Gale and Kawasaki, 2013). Business applications of social media marketing has significantly increased organizational successes (IRMA, 2018). Social media now represents a 'new ritual for public connection by facilitating political communication and promoting online civic engagement (Schwanholz et al., 2018). Instant messaging through chatting enables sharing of political information (Kaye and Johnson, 2006). When social browsing, students often use Facebook to learn more about people they met offline (Lampe et al., 2006). Technological change has also promoted interaction and engagement in organising collective action (Bimber et al., 2012). Across the globe, social media has been effective in providing a platform for ordinary citizens to voice their concerns (Yang 2013). Social media also plays a dual role to allow people to document their experiences and share their 'small moments', enabling social interaction (Bayer et al., 2016; Ozkul and Humphreys, 2015; Wang et al., 2015). People also use social media to fulfil their innate relatedness needs (Karahanna et al., 2018).

Literature is inundated with the effects of social media on political and democratic process. Using political lens, and underplaying the social, Harvey (2014) compiled an '*Encyclopedia of Social Media and Politics*' to show how the rise of social media has revolutionised politics in the United States and the world. Much of this literature integrates political variables in its analysis. In both Western democracies and less democratic settings, despite a growing literature on social impacts of social media, less attention has been paid to social impacts of shutting down these seemingly important social media networks.

In Zimbabwe, we know about the use and impact of social media as a tool for the silent and oppressed to regain their voices in the country (Gukurume, 2017, 51) or a useful platform for networking among Zimbabweans in the diaspora (Moyo, 2009; Mpofu, 2013). Previous research on social media use and its influence on political participation in Zimbabwe show that while discussion of protests is a dominant theme among social media users, most users are unwilling to participate in protests (Matingwina, 2018). Other cases acknowledge the increasing use of social media for political engagement by youths in Zimbabwe but conclude that this has contributed to youths political apathy because the online discussions lack seriousness and do not translate into active political action (Chiweshe, 2017). Mutsvairo and Sirks (2015) also show that Facebook enabled users to converge and openly discuss political issues, but the use of Facebook did not increase democratic participation in Zimbabwean politics. Thus, social media promotes political communication in Zimbabwe and among Zimbabwean diaspora (Kuhlmann, 2012). Mhiripiri and Mutsvairo (2014) argue that users sought for international support for the formation of the 2009 Government of National Unity (GNU) through social media activism in Zimbabwe. Research has shown that social media creates an alternative communication platform for Zimbabweans in the diaspora (Moyo, 2007). Thus, researchers seem to have given more attention to the debate on whether social media reinforce political participation particularly among Zimbabweans in their homeland. We, however, understand very little about the social impacts of social media shut down on the Zimbabwe diaspora.

It is not easy to evaluate social impact (Epstein and Yuthas, 2014), but I draw on in-depth interviews and Netnography – a research method drawing from ethnography to understand online social interactions of people - data to argue that

for many Zimbabweans in the diaspora, whose foremost platform to reconnect with their families in Zimbabwe was through social media, social media shutdown negatively impacted on their everyday social life. I show that, for most Zimbabwe diasporas, whose foremost platform to reconnect with their families was social media, social media shutdown interrupted family ties to regenerate a robust sense of isolation, loneliness and anxiety, renewed the struggle to keep family ties through uninterrupted communication and fostered personal and family insecurity as diasporas kept guessing what could be falling their families under the cover of the internet shutdown. These narratives reveal experiences of unsettled Zimbabwe diasporas who, while their employers were expecting them to work for the next paycheck, became unproductive as they were torn between work and the duty to protect their families in Zimbabwe. In effect, most diasporas productively spend most of their time on social media, neither to fulfil their employment obligations nor to chat with their families in Zimbabwe but to implore the international community to intervene. This article focuses on Zimbabwe with global implications on social impacts of social media.

The rest of the article is organised as follows. The next section analyses the case for the stayaway-cum-protest that prompted a 3-day nationwide protest to provide a background to the internet shutdown. Section three provides a methodological note on research methods and instruments used to understand social worlds of Zimbabweans in the diaspora. A brief analysis of the internet shutdown follows, presenting conflicting government responses to the deepening countrywide protests that seemed to have been coordinated through social media. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 10 purposively sampled respondents and online material, I present the experiences of social media shutdown on Zimbabwe diasporas in the following section before the summary and conclusions.

2. Zimbabwe's 'peaceful' stayaway-cum- protests

Following a 12 January 2019 presidential proclamation to increase fuel prices by more than 150% with effect from midnight on the same day, on the eve of President Mnangagwa's five-nation trade visit, the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) argued that the increase was illegal. ZCTU reiterated that fuel hikes- Petrol increased to \$3.31 a litre, from around \$1.46, and diesel increased to \$3.11 a litre from \$1.2.6 - would compound the workers' economic situation. ZCTU instantaneously declared that the #shutdownZimbabwe2019 it had slated for 14-16 January had begun immediately.

Some workers and self-employed people particularly in urban areas seemed to have not heeded to the three-day stayaway call on the early hours of the first day, but by midday the seemingly peaceful protest deteriorated into a violent encounter between the security forces and the citizens. The stayaway turned into a protest as some protesters and supposed national army personnel were reportedly stopping people from going to work or to go back home (Ndlovu, 2019). It is unusual in Zimbabwe's protest history for security forces to openly support a citizen stayaway. Perhaps the support is indicative of the deepening impacts of the Zimbabwean economic and political crisis to all Zimbabweans or signals factional politics within the ruling party which is beyond the focus of this article.

In Chitungwiza - one of the most densely populated suburbs, about 30km from Harare, with many people commuting daily to Harare for work and shopping - for example, teachers were reportedly beaten by soldiers and pupils were sent

back home (News24).¹ Videos of children running for their safety and anxious to get home circulated on social media. Some pupils who had braved the tense stayaway atmosphere to attend school did not report how they were dismissed from school but narrated that armed soldiers invaded schools and their teachers ran away.

3. Understanding social worlds of Zimbabwe diaspora: research methods

Zimbabwean migrants are spread across the globe, and this provides a wide space for sampling of research participants. In this study I sought to assess the impact of social media shutdown on Zimbabwean diaspora, particularly parents with children in Zimbabwe, without limiting the study to one country. This article draws, first, on in-depth interviews with Zimbabwe diasporas. Without an attempt to have a representative sample hitherto capture the qualitatively different but extensive experiences of Zimbabweans dispersed across the globe, invitation messages were initially extended to 25 social media users in 17 different countries. Only 10 respondents in United States, United Kingdom, South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Australia, and Germany accepted to participate in the study and were subsequently interviewed. Respondents were purposively selected based on their suitable biographies – parents in the diaspora who have their children in Zimbabwe - for this study. The focus on parents with children in Zimbabwe provides an opportunity to assess the social media blackout impacts on parents with consigned interests in their children's welfare amidst the everyday crises in Zimbabwe. Not all Zimbabweans in the diaspora keep regular contact with their families. Focusing on parents, thus, avoids a generalised consideration of the impacts on friends or close and distant family members distinctively affected with parents. Parents always strive to communicate with their children or guardians to their children back home. All respondents were allocated pseudonyms and their location will not be revealed to fortify anonymity. In-depth interviews essentially allowed the researcher to probe respondents on their personal experiences of social media blackout.

Second, I draw on Netnography to understand online social interactions of Zimbabwe diaspora during the social media blackout. As I was struggling to find alternative communication channels with my family in Zimbabwe during the shutdown, I became a 'participant observer' on social media (Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp), seeking to understand how other diasporas were coping. Online social media conversations provided a rich data set from which I applied text analysis (Sloan and Quan-Haase (2017, 387). Texts from social media are parsed to extract the social impacts of social media shut down.

4. Under the cover of social media blackout: the struggle to keep communicating

On the first day of the stayaway, the government initially shutdown all social media platforms before absolutely shutting down the internet. The government took conflicting responses when quizzed about the internet shutdown. Initially, the Ministry of Information, Broadcasting and Publicity denied a government instituted internet shutdown but claimed the internet somehow became dysfunctional due to congestion resulting from increasing use as people updated each other on the stayaway. Deputy Minister of Information and Publicity then, Energy Mutodi, claimed this on national Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation television 2000hrs main news broadcast on 16 January 2019. A

¹ <https://www.news24.com/Africa/Zimbabwe/live-zimbabweans-demonstrate-against-fuel-price-hike-20190114>;
<https://www.newsday.co.zw/2019/01/updates-on-the-zimbabwe-protests/> accessed 17 January 2019.

Zimeye- an online newsroom based in the United Kingdom - livestream phone interview with the Acting President, Retired Army General and current Vice President, Constantino Chiwenga, supported this position as he argued that the government will never issue out a directive to shutdown internet and it had no capacity to do so.

Meanwhile, Econet Wireless, Zimbabwe's biggest mobile operator commanding the widest coverage and highest subscribers, issued a statement to the effect that they had received an order to shutdown internet from the office of the president and had to comply pending legal proceedings challenging the government's directive.² Later, the government, through George Charamba, the Presidential Spokesperson, acknowledged that it had shut down the internet as it was used as a tool to coordinate the ZCTU organized stayaway.³ Despite these conflicting claims by the government, a court challenge by Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA), through Zimbabwe Human Rights Lawyers, later pointed to a government hand. In a surprising high court ruling, perhaps to illustrate separation of powers between arms of the state - the judiciary, state and government - the court offered relief to the applicant, ordering an immediate restoration of all internet services without restriction.⁴

Up to this time, internet remained shut down, making Zimbabwe a black hole with many Zimbabwe diasporas guessing about the welfare of their families, relatives and friends. It is this social media shutdown during internet shutdown that has become known as 'shutdown within shutdown' among Zimbabweans that reinforced anxiety among users. Despite the patchy history of upholding of court orders by the government, unrestricted internet services were restored before sunset, reopening the gates of social media and offering relief to many diasporas who had lost touch with their loved ones.

A key question arising from the shutdown is how Zimbabweans responded. In other words, how did Zimbabweans stay online during the shutdown. It is often said that necessity is the mother of invention. Social media shutdown meant the cutting of social ties between citizens within and outside Zimbabwe. In response to the social media blackout, some Zimbabweans with internet access, particularly WIFI platforms, turned to installing Virtual Private Network (VPN), a technology that creates a safe and encrypted connection over a less secure network, such as the internet and is increasingly used to access state restricted social media platforms especially in authoritarian regimes, on their mobile devices. The use of VPN enabled social media users to either access their previous social media platforms and or to install other uncommon platforms particularly telegram and PSHO. Nonetheless, more than 60 percent of the parents interviewed had their VPN connections interrupted more than twice resulting in periods of total communication blackout.

² Econet CEO, Strive Masiyiwa, posted this on his facebook timeline. Econet later issued a statement on its website. Also see <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/world/africa/2019-01-18-zimbabwe-government-tells-econet-to-shut-down-internet/> accessed 27 January 2019.

³ George Charamba's statement from Russia and the government public statement. Accessed 20 January 2019 <http://www.newsdezeimbabwe.co.uk/2019/01/why-we-had-to-shut-down-internet.html> . A South Africa Broadcasting Corporation news bulletin also show that the Zimbabwean government admitted to shutting down the internet, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g1OqZ5pJyVI> accessed 20 January 2019.

⁴ Court ruling on this case is available on <https://www.mysimbabwe.co.zw/technology/39319-breaking-high-court-judge-delivers-ruling-on-internet-shutdown.html> accessed 21 January 2019.

Zimbabweans in the diaspora supported their emigrant families in using these platforms in different ways. About 80 percent of respondents indicated that they bought internet data bundles for their families from service providers outside Zimbabwe. Information on these new platforms and the use of VPN was not evenly spread within Zimbabwe. All respondents shared this information with their families and 70 percent of their families only learnt about the use of VPN from their diaspora families. Interactions on Twitter and Facebook show that Zimbabweans in the diaspora used these platforms to inform their followers and friends about the newfound gateway to communication during the shutdown.

With limited communication options, another common coping mechanism across most Zimbabwe diasporas was to make short and irregular phone calls. One respondent articulated that, *'In instances where I would normally call or talk to them [my family] 5 times a day, I had to reduce this to just one call a day - and not as long a call as I would have wanted it to be,'* (Interview with Shame, 19 February 2019). The short calls were necessitated by the cost of calling to Zimbabwe. On average, it costs US\$0.25 to make a one-minute call to Zimbabwe.

5. Social impacts of social media #shutdown2019

Many emigrant's families counted their political and economic losses during social media shutdown but Zimbabweans in the diaspora recounted social impacts of this shutdown on their everyday life. The impacts of the overall internet shutdown have been reported in the local and international media. For Zimbabweans in the homeland, the shutdown is likely to have caused 'huge financial losses, disrupted health services and damaged the country's reputation as being open for business'.⁵ To most diasporas, social media shutdown was stressful because the shutdown destroyed the social fabric that tied Zimbabwean families. The shutdown prompted Zimbabweans in the diaspora to protest at Zimbabwean embassies across the world including South Africa. Key social implications of shutting down social media from in-depth interviews and Netnography data show diasporas lost social capital stemming from disrupted social attachment facilitated by social media, cutting down of social interactions occasioned renewal of the struggle to maintain family ties, insecurity manifested from fear of not knowing family welfare during the shutdown and hopes of solutions to Zimbabwe's political and socio-economic crises were shattered.

5.1 Loss of social capital

Social media promotes the accumulation of social capital – family psychosocial support – between social groups including family and friends. For most Zimbabwean diasporas, social media is primarily used to bond with families despite the long distances separating them. Social media is especially important for Zimbabweans parents in the diaspora to keep regular contact with their children. All interviewees indicated that they take advantage of cheap social media platforms to keep ties with their families in Zimbabwe. One respondent, Busisiwe, in Australia, remarked, "I make sure I talk to my child every day, or at least ask my mother about Toddy [Busisiwe's 11-year-old son] ones in two days. I can't be a parent who totally leave my child with my mother and forget about him. At least there are cheap ways of keeping contact. I use WhatsApp almost all the time. I rarely make a phone call."

⁵ <https://www.myzimbabwe.co.zw/technology/39319-breaking-high-court-judge-delivers-ruling-on-internet-shutdown.html> accessed 21 January 2019.

The frequency to directly contact children and their guardians varied among the respondents but with all respondents indicating that they hardly spend more than two days without contact. Kudzai, a respondent based in New York in the United States, echoed, “I send WhatsApp messages at least twice a day although I sometimes skip a day. But all this was shut down with no idea what was happening home.” Thus, internet and social media #shutdown2019 regenerated feelings of isolation, loneliness, and anxiety. Zimbabwean parents in the diaspora were cut off from the families and this had psychological effects on their social wellbeing. Most interviewees were anxious to have updates about their families in Zimbabwe.

In-depth interviews and online social interactions analysis show that hopelessness, helplessness, and despondence permeated Zimbabwe diasporas’ lived experiences during the social media blackout. With so many miles separating families in Zimbabwe and the diaspora, *‘life seemed to have stopped for a moment, with very little if not nothing to do about it,’* (Interview with Moses, 28 February 2019). For some diasporas, discontinued social media made them psychologically disoriented.

5.2 Renewed struggle to maintain family ties through sustained social interactions

Zimbabwean migrants, spread across the globe, usually struggle to keep ties with their families back home for two main reasons. First, work commitments and the ensuing workload emanating, in some cases, from working long hours to make more money to send home or because they have more than one job for the same reasons. These commitments make it difficult to keep family ties particularly for parents with children in Zimbabwe. Second, the cost of communicating with family outside social media is prohibitive. Seventy percent of all the respondents indicated that it was expensive to make phone calls Zimbabwe hence they used WhatsApp calls more frequently. Kudzai, a US-based respondent said, “Even on Boss Revolution [a call platform usually used by immigrants for international calling], I need 75 cents to call my daughter in Zimbabwe but only use nine cents to call my brother in South Africa for the same \$3 credit card.” Three respondents in Botswana, Mozambique and Germany cited calling costs associated with poor network connection during the blackout. They reported that call airtime was lost due to voicemails. For Tynash, a Germany based father of three children living with his mother in Morningside suburb in Gweru, “Calling home was not only expensive because of the call charges, but several attempts to call were unsuccessful. The attempts ended up in voicemails. The network connection was bad. I couldn’t get through. I was hopeless. As a result, I lost a lot of airtime.” These sentiments were echoed by Servious living in Australia for a decade and has made four attempts to have his wife and two children join him without success. Servious said, “I am used to call my family several times daily on WhatsApp. It’s expensive to make a phone call you know. The worst think is I struggled to get through my wife’s phone. This [the social media shutdown] was pathetic. I don’t know. This must not be repeated because WhatsApp keeps my family and I together although they are very far.”

Despite these communication limitations the Zimbabwe diaspora still make frantic efforts to keep ties with their families. Social media shutdown, however, renewed and compounded the struggle to keep family ties through interrupting the everyday means of communication between Zimbabwe and the diaspora. It was an inconvenience to most people as indicated by one respondent:

The major impact was just the inconvenience this had on me as I failed to talk to my family as often as I would have loved to. In instances where I would normally call or talk to them five times a day this was reduced to just one call a day - and not as long a call as I would have wanted it to be (Interview with Shame).

Related to this struggle to remit cash to families in Zimbabwe. Fifty percent of the respondents had sent money through World Remit and could not follow up if their families had received the money due to the shutdown. Most of the transactions were meant to meet emergency needs such as to purchase medicines and since the receivers could not provide feedback to senders in the diaspora on whether they had managed to withdraw the money, the shutdown period was traumatic.

5.3 Personal and family insecurity

Zimbabwean parents in the diaspora with children in Zimbabwe suffered insecurity at two levels. First, the internet shutdown fostered a sense of insecurity on themselves. Most diasporas feel secure when they continuously receive updates from home, including experiences of political and economic impacts on their families. Having updated knowledge of these developments give diasporas personal security. Despite extensive media coverage by both international and local media on the events on the general populace, lack of this knowledge directly from their relatives made the diaspora wander to foster insecurity and unhappiness. These findings are consistent with earlier studies arguing that multilevel regression suggest that people are less happy when their minds were wandering (Killingsworth and Gilbert, 2010).

A source of the second level of insecurity is the absence of information on what is politically and economically happening to their families. The imagination associated with this anxiety made diasporas unsettled, engulfed by a sense of fear of the unknown. Diasporas' everyday life became congested with questions on what is happening to their families, are their families still in Zimbabwe and, most importantly, are family members still alive. For one respondent, the major concern for her was:

The paranoia that came with this [internet shut down] of not knowing whether people are fine back home due to the reports we were hearing and because we did not have access to what was happening back home (Interview with Shame).

More worrisome, particularly to parents, is the knowledge that some juveniles⁶ were amongst the arrested, information that reached the diaspora before the shutdown. The looting of shops, damaging of properties⁷ by some protesters and their subsequent dragnet arrests and death attributed to live ammunition by state security forces in some cities deepened the diasporas' insecurity. The diaspora was not sure if their children may end up arrested as well. This uncertainty created a sense of insecurity and hopelessness which manifested in sadness. One respondent lamented

⁶ <http://www.zhrc.org.zw/monitoring-report-in-the-aftermath-of-the-14-january-to-16-january-2019-stay-away-and-subsequent-disturbances/>

⁷ Ibid.

that, *'Tarwadziwa, vazvidira jecha'* (*'This is painful, the government has spoiled our communication'* (Interview with Taedzwa, 26 February 2019).

Time differences between Zimbabwe and other parts of the world especially the United States exacerbated anxiety and personal security among parents in the diaspora. Because of the 6–8-hour time difference between Zimbabwe and the United States, depending on where one is in the United States, parents hardly slept during the communication blackout. Fari, a mother of two girls staying with her sister in Harare, based in New York, 6-hours behind Harare in Zimbabwe, said “I was so drained by the shutdown of social media. I could hardly sleep. You know I was constantly checking expecting to get a Facebook update or a message on WhatsApp from Harare. Nothing, I mean nothing came. It was time to sleep here but I couldn't.” Blessing, a father of one another based in Dallas, seven-hours behind Zimbabwe, equally lost sleep due to the communication blackout. Blessing spent most of his time on social media after work until the next morning as he tried contact his aunt who stays with his 13-year-old daughter. He said “Twitter and Facebook became my ‘newspapers’. I couldn't afford the luxury to sleep although it was time to sleep here in the US [United States].” Two respondents in the United Kingdom were less affected by the one-hour time difference but indicated that they also lost sleep as they slept late and woke up early to check on their relatives in the early hours of the day. Aisha, a single mother of one daughter under the guardianship of her mother in Mutare remarked that “I made sure I wake up at 5am. My mother is usually up at that time and was expecting to hear from her, but this time I fooled myself. Nothing happened.”

As diasporas kept guessing what could be falling their families under the cover of the internet shutdown, they kept a sense of hope that they will hear from their families anytime. That sense of hope, and false hope to others who later learnt of the death of their families through other platforms particularly phone calls, reduced their insecurity albeit absolutely.

5.4 Shattered hopes and fear to lose employment

Community and individual resilience have always ignited a strong sense of hope among Zimbabwe diaspora despite the debilitating economic and political situation experienced in Zimbabwe for more than a decade. The hope that Zimbabwe will have solutions to its political, economic, and social challenges and diasporas will go back home again kept Zimbabweans at home and abroad optimistic. Almost all the interviewed parents indicated that they were hopeful before the communication blackout. Excepting two parents, all the parents had imagined a time when they would reunite with their children and families in Zimbabwe. Shutting down social media crushed these hopes as it came at a time when most diasporas least expected it. One respondent remarked that, “We have escaped for now... but the road is still bad ahead of us.”

The shutdown left more than half the interviewees grappling with the questions, *'Kuti zvichiri nesolution here izvi, pavazosvika apa pakaoma?* (Does the obtaining situation have a solution? The leadership has reached the climax by shutting down social media). Others questioned, *'Kuti zvingagadzirike nepazvasvika apa?'* (Are we ever going to reverse this obtaining situation?). This sense of futility could be heard from diasporas' voices that have given up. Some interviewees appealed for divine intervention for a way out of the shutdown while others believed it was high

time the international community step in to rescue Zimbabweans. One person wailed, '*Dai Mwari vapindira, isu atichazvigoni*' (May the Lord intervene, we have failed to solve this).

These narratives reveal experiences of disconcerted Zimbabwe diasporas who, while their employers expected them to work for the next paycheck, became unproductive as they were torn between work and the need to maintain family ties. Social media posts and interviewees show that most diasporas were disturbed by the shutdown to the extent of getting distracted from their work. One interviewee said, '*Ko panga pachamboshandika here usingazive zviri kuitika kumusha*' (I could not concentrate on my work as I wanted to know what was happening to my family in Zimbabwe). In effect, most diasporas productively spend most of their time on social media, not with their emigrant families but to call the international community to intervene. Almost all the interviewees believed the international community, particularly the United Nations, the African Union and SADC could assist in the full restoration of full internet access including social media.

6. Summary and Conclusions

The 2019 government-instituted social media shutdown in Zimbabwe is associated with huge social impacts on the Zimbabwe diaspora. As events of the ZCTU organised stayaway-cum-protest unfolded, most people, especially in urban areas in Zimbabwe, could have counted both political and economic impacts on their lives. Government's restriction of internet was supposedly to stop social unrest enabled by social media. Social media shutdown, conversely, signaled the death of democracy under darkness. For the Zimbabwe diaspora, shutting down social interaction channels, in addition to the worsening political and economic experiences of emigrants' families in Zimbabwe, negatively affected their social wellbeing. Social interactions are known to allow people to keep ties and are positively correlated with happiness (Sandstrom and Dunn, 2014; Sandstrom, 2013). This was the case for Zimbabweans until communication between the Zimbabwe diaspora and their emigrant families was effectively restrained by social media shutdown. This article is consistent with prior works arguing that social media is an imperative channel through which social support is shared between close relations (Rozzell et al., 2014). Beyond this, the shutting down of social media withdrew the most convenient channel of sharing social support available to Zimbabwe diasporas and their emigrant families. It is Zimbabweans in the diaspora who carried the social burden of the shutdown as communication with their families was suspended.

Social media interactions text analysis and in-depth interviews suggest that the Zimbabwe diaspora celebrated participation of their families in the stayaway. This seems to reflect a new development for many families who previously feared participation in stayaways and protests to influence the political leadership and the government to reconsider implementing social policies that improve their welfare. The aftermath of this participation, however, is risky as government unleashed the army to protesters. Zimbabwe diaspora has endured social consequences of the government's response to protesters and non-protesters. Systematic torture instigated by the security forces to Zimbabweans in the homeland compounded the diasporas' social wellbeing concerns. Such concerns can be mitigated against if all relevant stakeholders in Zimbabwe's state building actively contribute to the solution. Moreover, the government should acknowledge that the legal responsibility to do right by protecting the social rights of citizens both in Zimbabwe and in the diaspora rests with it.

Acknowledgements

The author is indebted to Zimbabwean diasporas who took time off their busy schedules to participate in this study.

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