J Communication, 8(1): 44-55 (2017)
DOI: 10.31901/24566586.2017/08.01.173

A Network Analysis of Conversational News Readers on Political and Economic Zimbabwe Online Media

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KEYWORDS Centrality. Commenter. Degree. Edge. Participant. Vertices

ABSTRACT The Internet has a variety of media outlets which promotes users' interaction and participation on news discussion forums. Thus the reader's interaction on the commentary forum has developed into a discursive online communities that experience the interaction of old members and the continual influx of new members. Therefore, this paper analyses the connectivity and interaction of participants in a political online community found on the readers' commentary forum attached to *NewZimbabwe.com*. The paper uses mainly network analysis to explore the interaction of the online community members or news readers by sampling a total number of 212 commenters. The findings of this paper assert that the discursive nature of the readers' online community is argumentative, abusive and sometimes sarcastic. The news readers' interaction is stimulated by commenters' online personality traits, shared interests in the topic and messages that are offensive or provocative.

INTROUDCTION

The Internet has become an alternative platform for news consumptions, freedom of assembly and expression (O'Reilly 2005). In Zimbabwe, the internet is an alternative news forum for interaction and information consumption where participants freely participate without restrictions (Moyo 2009). The news sites on internet provide people with alternative sources of information, which was beforehand restricted to the registered media companies in Zimbabwe (Mano and Willems 2006; Moyo 2007; Peel 2009). The internet has also played a role in assembling the population in diaspora and in the homeland to interact and share opinions on social media, wikis, blogs and news feedback forums. Thus the Web 2.0 technologies have reduced communication barriers and increased the level of news consumption (Whoolley et al. 2010; Kim and Lowrey 2014).

Public forums available on the internet have become virtual spaces for debate, interaction by online communities that share experiences (Moyo 2009). For example, the *Newzimbabwe.com* "offers its readers a chance to be both consumers and producers of content – a development peculiar to online media" (Mpofu 2013: 115). Thus with the availability of online public forums, media users produce their own content by actively engaging in public discussion to gratify their social and political needs (Luo 2013: 34). Some studies view online news readers whvo interact on news site forum as active citizens (Shulman 2005; Hindman 2009), while others argue that only few active citizens get mobilised by the internet (Bimber 2000; Scheufele and Nisbet 2002).

The online news readers argue, state facts and "define themselves in relation to other people" (Myers 2010: 4). Scheufele and Nisbet (2002: 16) said that online news readers form a discursive community viewed metaphorically, as an "electronic town meeting, which enable users to engage in political discussions and deliberations." The phrase "electronic town meeting" convey the perspective that the participants have technological privileges to access the discussion forum.

Banda (2010: 9) viewed the online commentary forum as a new media that indicates "unbounded possibilities for citizen journalism." Citizen journalism is seen "as an individual, group without involvement from paid, trained professionals" (Nip 2006: 218) and not in collaboration with the mainstream journalism. Citizen journalism is also understood as participatory journalism because it involves the participation of au-

diences in the writing of news (Nip 2006: 218; Thilaka and Natarajan 2012: 117; Kim and Lowrey 2014). In other context, the audiences act as news agents, they set the agenda, and discuss issues as agenda setters and by determining the agenda setting, they produce news themselves (Domingo et al. 2008: 335; Hermida and Thurman 2008; Rosen 2008). This means commenters as citizen journalists "gather, process, research, report, analyse and publish news and information, most often utilising a variety of technologies made possible by the internet" (Ross and Cormier 2010: 66) bypassing gatekeeping practices by the mainstream media (Lewis et al. 2010).

On the other hand, empirical studies highlight that online discussions cannot be viewed as citizen deliberations because they are void of true deliberation (Strandberg and Berg 2013). The involvement of commenters in public discussion does not necessarily mean that the discussion is meaningful (Manosevitch and Walker 2009: 2). However, some scholars view public forums as a form of public sphere that makes commenters exercise their freedom of expression, association and participation to influence a variety of issues (Mummery and Rodan 2013; Chan et al. 2014). A public sphere is a platform where "access is guaranteed to all citizens with the guarantee of freedom of assembly, and association and freedom to express and publish their opinion about matters of interest" (Habermas 1989: 73-74).

As a public sphere, the online commentary platform produces public discourse by citizens who are interactive (Hauser 1999; Strandberg and Berg 2013: 133). Discourse is viewed as "ways that language works in our engagements with the world and our interactions with each other, so creating and shaping the social, political and cultural formations of our societies" (Hyland and Paltridge 2001: 1). Hence public discourse is a collective action of participation on public forums (Calhoun 1992; Sellers 2004; Chan et al. 2014). Therefore, the freedom of expression and participation provided by online commentary forums promotes public discourse and public deliberations useful for journalists, governments, individuals and societies (Mummery and Rodan 2013).

The public discourse produced by commenters on new sites also inform journalists about audience behaviour and their perception towards issues published (Shoemaker et al. 2008: 73; Chung 2008: 660). Journalists can "track commenters' behaviour" in order to provide "commenters' content preferences" (Vu 2014: 2). This means online feedback discussions can be used by news reporters to re-examine the news worthiness of a topic that could make them adopt better ways of reporting (Santana 2011). A paper by Karlsson (2010) adds that commenters are effective in the dominant media because they can influence the writing of news by criticising the misleading headlines and content.

Objectives of the Study

The objective of this paper is to evaluate the media user or news readers' connectivity and interaction in a public commentary forum attached to Zimbabwe online political or economic news articles and to give an indication of how these news readers socialise. Previous studies have been focusing on the discourse produced by media audiences and giving less attention to how the online community members interact and what causes other social actors more influential than others. Studying how online community members socialise in a political environment enlighten on the complexity of political socialisation in a realistic Zimbabwean community.

This paper, takes into account the network of online news readers or commenters and how their posts provoke replies from other online community members. To study the discursive community online, this paper uses network analysis to analyse commenters' conversational interaction. Network analysis is a mixed method research technique which involves the study of participants' interactivity and relationships (Hansen et al. 2011: 3-5). Therefore, network analysis is used in this paper as a triangulation technique that approaches the study from different angles. However, to study the interaction of the news readers, the researcher has to also analyse the issues that make them interact. Hence, this paper also uses a content analysis of the political and economic issues discussed to fully understand the ways and purposes for interaction.

Literature Review

Johnson et al. (2015) examined the leadership roles on online communities by identifying most influential participants. They focus on analysing the language use and assess if language differentiates online community leaders from

other members. John et al. (2015) applied a textual analysis to evaluate the utterances of the online community members. They noted that online community members viewed as influential by other participants use language differently than all others. "They are among frequent posters, use positive language, have concise posts and use language that is more prototypical of the community" (Johnson et al. 2015: 33). This mean that influential participants use typical language, familiar and appealing to other participants.

De Laart (2002) used both a network and content analysis to study interactions patterns of a Dutch community of police members. The study shows that the interaction patterns are centralised and the network between the members is relatively dense. De Laart (2002) noted that communication within the police discourse was person to person, although most members showed activeness. The network does not reflect all members interacting in the network but only direct responses to individuals and members hardly replied to a comment except comments posted earlier than others (De Laart 2002).

Majdán (2012) made use of a social network analysis to evaluate the success and sustainability of online communities. He noted that online communities are sustained by the influx of new members and success depends on the interaction of old and new members. The network between the old and new members depends on how these communicate with each other (Majdán 2012). Majdán (2012: 4) specifically highlighted that "the influx of new users on the online community show the real nature of a question and answer forum rather than a discursive one." This means that with a question and answer forum the network would be more interactive if new users continue emerging than the discursive forum if new users post without interacting with the old users.

Zhang et al. (2007: 222) noted that online communities are identifiable by their "discussion thread structure" where user posts and others reply. Zhang et al. (2007) discussed participants' posts as posting or replying threads and they based their analysis on creating a post-reply network. Their study connected interacting participants as nodes to illustrate social relationships and to reflect shared interests by community members. Zhang et al (2007: 222) argued that participants reply to a post or topic because they have "interest in the content of the topic rather than who started the thread." There exist shared interests about the topic between the original poster and repliers although their feeling and behaviour may differ towards the issue under discussion (Zhang et al. 2007).

Some scholars use the social network visualisation to illustrate the analysis of post-reply patterns in an online community (Fisher et al. 2006). Network visualisation makes use of in-degree, (how many users a participant replied to) and out degree (how many participants replied to the user). The network visualisation differentiates types of participants, for example the most active participants (central participants), the most interactive ones and those influential in the network. Fisher et al. (2006) highlighted that interactions among online participants vary in terms of populations and the roles they play. Therefore, Fisher et al. (2006) identified characteristics of populations that include "question and answer newsgroups, conversational newsgroups, social support newsgroups and flame support newsgroups."

In another context, Bail (2016) used network analysis, natural language processing and social media application to analyse public discourse on Facebook and how advocacy organisations can use cultural bridges to provoke public discourse. Bail (2016) noted that a thread that provokes more replies or comments from social media users, reflect substantial cultural bridges. This partly insinuates that there is a sense of cultural familiarity in the text that appeals to large number of media users.

Moyo and Mathe (2014) also applied a network analysis to analyse the relations among Zimbabwean ethnic groups. Their paper showed varying relations among the social members due to ethnic cultural differences such as language barrier and differences in both personal interests and environmental origins. Thus some social members' relations were based on common interests rather than similarities in ethnicity.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper uses network analysis as research method to analyse news readers' online interaction. Network analysis is a mixed method research technique and involves "the application of a broader field of network science to the study of human relationships and connections" (Hans-

en et al. 2011: 3-5). It also studies the pattern of social patterns or communication patterns in a wide range of "physical social phenomena" (Hansen et al. 2011: 35). People interact at different levels and a wider pattern of connections can be drawn out using *NodeXL*. In this study, the number of influential readers was measured and reduced to numbers. The participants or readers were seen as *vertices*, connections among readers were analysed as *edges* and the total number of replies to a commenter are evaluated as a *degree of centrality*.

This paper uses the network analysis which can visualise "complex sets of relationships of the online community and calculate precise measures of the size, shape and density of the network as a whole and the positions of each element with it" (Hansen et al. 2011: 32). The visible graph metrics (NodeXL) which calculate the inter-connections and measuring the density of the network presents links and available images. The network analysis gives us a broader view of the online community varying from this commenter to another.

In addition, the researcher also applies a content analysis to analyse the content produced by news readers in order to understand their discourse or issues that make them interact. A content analysis is a research method that is normally used to analyse a text (Krippendorff 2004). A comment by news reader is a text that need to be analysed in order to understand why it provokes interaction. This means this paper uses content analysis to support a network analysis of online readers' interaction.

Population

The population for this study are the commenters online, who are assumed to be interactive Zimbabweans both in the country and in diaspora.

The study purposively focuses on the public commentary forum found on *New Zimbabwe.com*. The website was chosen on the basis of its popularity among Zimbabwe internet users and has a feedback function forum where readers comment and interact. The *NewZimbabwe.com* is commonly known among Zimbabweans for promoting analyses of news stories that cover the taboo discourses, news stories forbidden by the state and it offers a platform for readers' interactions (Willems and Mano 2006).

The *NewZimbabwe.com* has the largest user generated content compared with other online news sites. It is viewed as the biggest website that covers current Zimbabwean issues and it is the first website online publication formed by Zimbabweans abroad (Mpofu 2013). It was launched online in 2003 by former Zimbabwean journalists (Moyo 2007) and has a professional layout with frequently updated news.

Sampling Technique

Purposive or judgmental sampling was used to extract a population of 212 commenters. This involved the collection of commenters and their comments found on public commentary attached to political and economic news articles on *NewZimbabwe.com*. The researcher observed the interactivity of commenters online and collected data within a time frame that extended from 1 March 2014 to 30 June 2014. The commenters and their comments, however were extracted a month after this period as participation often continues to occur for an unspecified period after publication.

RESULTS

The Discursive Community

The researcher noted that the commenters online are interactive and participative from time to time depending on the topic under discussion. The most participative reader had the highest degree centrality while the lowest had the lowest degree centrality although the commenters' participation continues to occur for an unspecified period, hence results can fluctuate.

The discursive community online consists of common and new social identities across the news stories. The researcher found out that there are popular online personalities or social actors, who are always available from one comment forum to the other and those who seldom comment. Commenters comment unevenly across stories and some of the commenters arouse many responses than others. Comments that arouse counteract and negative or positive responses are mostly controversial because they are either informative or ridiculous. Figure 1 gives an example of a conversation between two community members discussing a case in which one

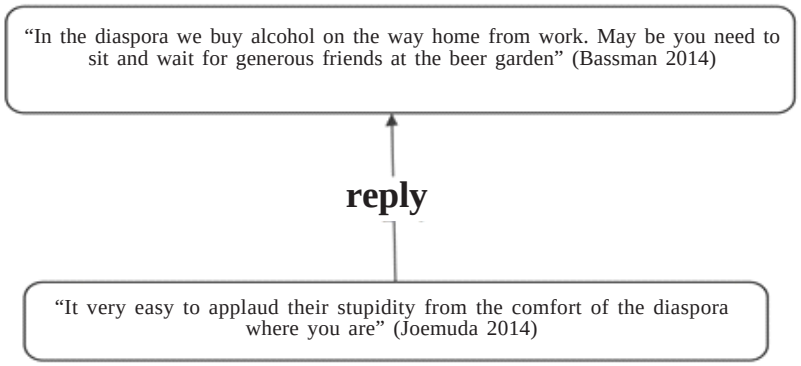

Fig. 1. Topic: Diaspora (created using VUE)
Source: Author

is commenting from Zimbabwe while the other from diaspora.

Figure 2 also gives another example of news readers' discussion, provoking and labeling each other. Topics that has to do with their security issues or that involve Central Intelligence Operatives attract readers' attention.

CIO refers to the Central Intelligence Organisation and *Chimbwasungata chemunhu* is a *Shona* phrase meaning "you fool". The conversation reflects the type of a provocative, name calling or labelling practiced by online community members.

Figure 3 also illustrates the tense conversation among community members that share their perspectives about the dominance of two major political parties in Zimbabwe.

Their conversation further shows that commenters negatively label other participants who tend to be oppositional or controversial. Major political leaders are also labelled in the discussion, for example, the first lady is called *Dis-Grace*, President Mugabe is called *Matibili or Gushungo* and Morgan Tsvangirai is called *Chematama.* This shows that labelling is one of the characteristics of an online community discourse.

Furthermore, some posts reflect the commenter's emotional behaviour that is abusive and sarcastic. The words like *fool, idiot, stupid, mo-*

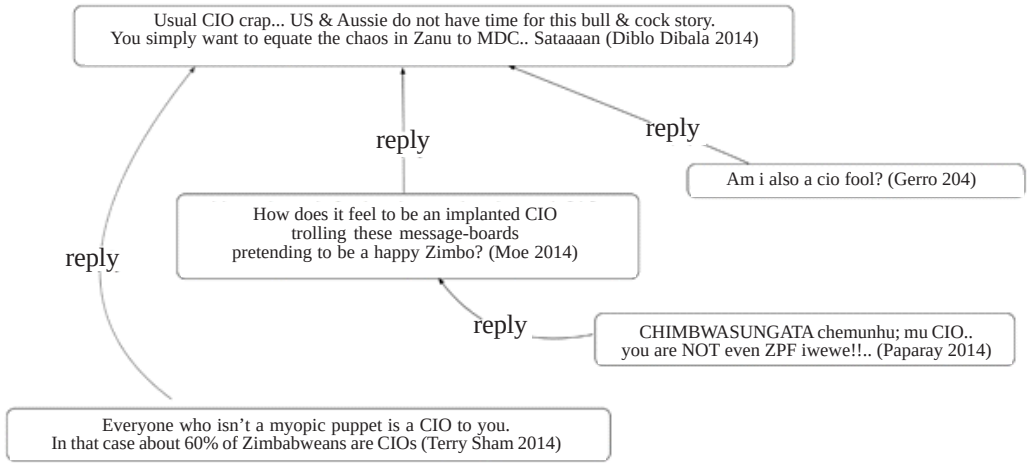

Fig. 2. Topic: Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) (created using VUE)
Source: Author

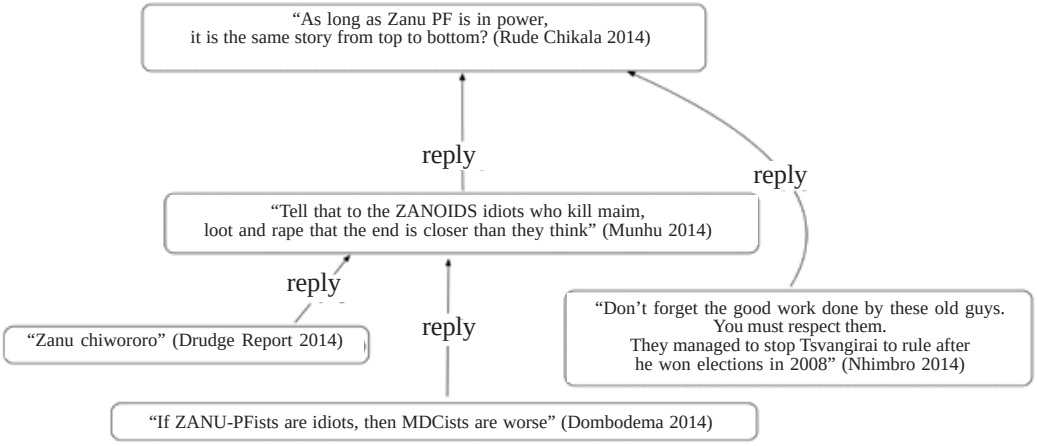

Fig. 3. Topic: ZANU PF and MDC (created using VUE)
Source: Author

ron are commonly used. The commenters online also reflect a wavering mood determined by the tone used in the news story. Although they contribute sound information, their reasoning tends to be unstable and sarcastic. Sarcastic responses and insults are more exchanged when one commenter arouses or insults the intelligence of the other.

The Most Interactive Online Commenters

This section illustrates the influence of central commenters in a virtual space of the readers' commentary forum. The researcher used a Microsoft Excel worksheet called NodeXL to present a network analysis of the participants and their pattern of interaction online. It measures

the scope of interaction and the influence of every individual in the discursive community. The NodeXL graph metrics was used to calculate the "degrees" of interaction.

Figure 4 shows the interaction of commenters online. The characters captured represent the dominant interactive participants online. The largest vertices represent the most dominant ones as the graph shrinks to the less dominant. Among the 212 participants, only 68 were found to be highly interactive due to the number of responses. The rest could post a comment once but the dominant commenters could post unevenly from this story to another. Some could stay online responding to other commenters.

The most influential commenters generate news, inform and deliberately respond to other commenters. Some would post messages several times, for example *AFROboy, Rafique 702, Rude Chikala, Bassman, Owen Zvobho, Joe Rug* (These are pseudo names used by the commenters on online news) so that others could comment once and provoke responses from other commenters. This shows that some comments attract replies more than others. The commenters with many replies on their posts, acquires more in degree centrality while commenter who reply often to other commenters' posts acquires more out-degree centrality. The more the replies the larger the degree centrality and shows that the commenter is an influential member in the community. The influential commenters reflected in Figure 4 occupy large spaces. Thus Table 1 gives in detail the quantitative degree of interaction among community members.

Table 1 metrics reflect the scope of interaction and inter-networks within a discursive community. Online participants interact to the extent that they become familiar with each others' online identities and personality traits. These relations can be studied by looking on the graph metrics such as the degree centrality, (in-degree and out degree), betweenness centrality, closeness centrality, eingenvector centrality and clustering coefficient.

A degree refers to a total number of in-degree and out-degree (Hansen et al. 2011). The

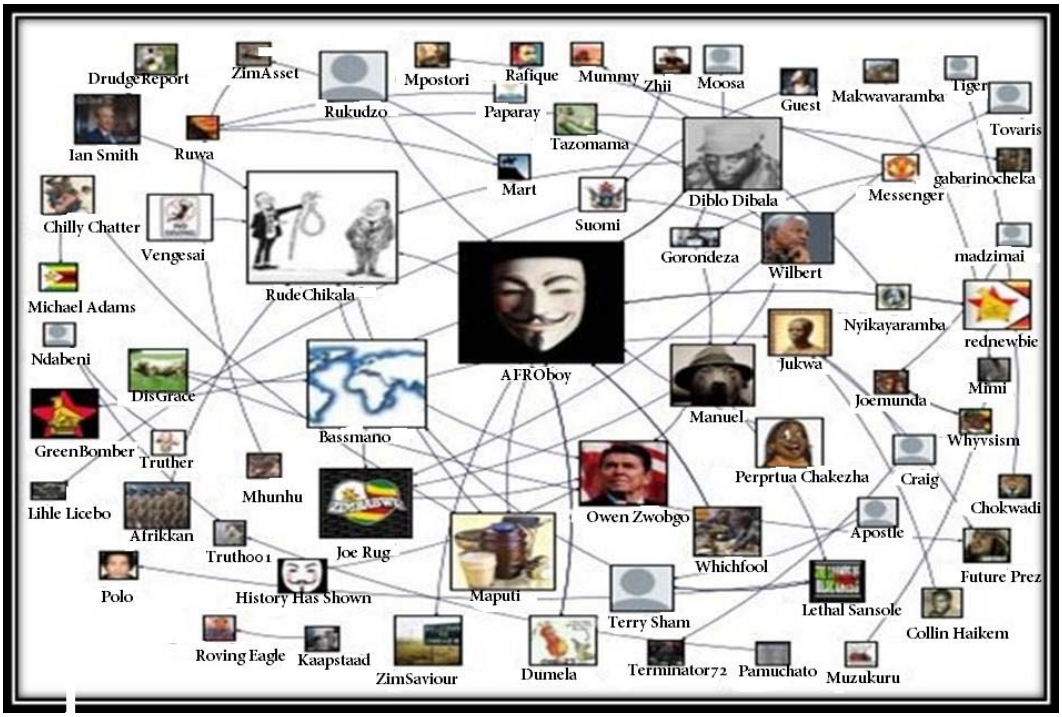

Fig. 4. The most interactive online commenters (created using *NodeXL*)
Source: Author

in-degree measures the number of replies (connections) represented with edges pointing inward at a reader (vertex). The number of replies a participant receives, determine the effectiveness of the message sent or the reader's regular interaction. The message either arouses more reason or abusive responses. Commenters with a highest in-degree interact more than others. The out-degree also shows the activeness of the reader in the discursive community. The out-degree implies reaching out, responding to other contributions. For example, *AFROboy* has the highest degree. This reflects that the reader being the participant is a regular commenter.

Betweenness centrality is a measure of how often a reader or participant interacts with other members in the discursive community (Hansen et al. 2011). Betweenness centrality also shows the level of influence a participant has in the discursive community. The graph shows that *Bassman* has the highest betweenness centrality marked 1108.000 more of his comments are sarcastic and abusive followed by *Rude Chikala* with 941.000 betweenness centrality and *AFROboy* with 535.000. The highest betweenness centrality also implies that the participant responds immediately or frequently to other feedbacks and may reflect that the participant is always online.

Closeness centrality takes a "different perspective from the network vertices capturing the average distance between a vertex and other vertex in the network" (Hansen et al. 2011: 32). The discussion forum shows that the participants' posts in real time. This implies that time taken to receive a feedback from online respondents determines the closeness centrality of those respondents. Commenters may keep connected and discussing online when logged in. Participants seem to be having an average closeness centrality varying from 1.000 to 0.004.

Eigenvector centrality introduces the assertion that communicating to some other participants might be better than communicating to others, which means some connections are valuable and some are not. The eigenvector approach is an "effort to find the most central actors in terms of the structure of the network" (Hanne-

Table 1: Graph metrics showing centrality of interaction

Vertex	*Degree*	*In-degree*	*Out-degree*	*Betweenness centrality*	*Closeness centrality*	*Eigen vector*	*Clustering coefficient*
Rukudzo	1	0	1	0.000	0.006	0.027	0.000
Perpetual	1	0	1	0.000	0.006	0.027	0.000
AFROboy	12	5	7	535.000	0.007	0.101	0.022
Dumela	2	1	1	0.000	0.006	0.027	0.000
Zimsaviour	1	1	0	0.000	0.006	0.027	0.000
Diblo Dibala	2	1	1	0.000	0.007	0.051	0.500
Rude Chikala	7	6	1	941.000	0.009	0.092	0.048
Chilly	2	0	2	82.000	0.005	0.016	0.000
Michael	1	1	0	0.000	0.004	0.004	0.000
Whichfool	1	0	1	0.000	0.006	0.027	0.000
Rednewbie	2	1	1	0.000	0.006	0.027	0.000
Greenbomber	1	1	0	0.000	0.006	0.027	0.000
Maputi	3	3	0	160.000	0.007	0.055	0.167
Muzukuru	1	0	1	0.000	0.333	0.000	0.000
Mimi	2	2	0	2.000	0.500	0.000	0.000
Makwavara	1	0	1	0.000	0.333	0.000	0.000
Chokwadi	1	0	1	0.000	1.000	0.000	0.000
Tiger	1	1	0	0.000	1.000	0.000	0.000
Manuel	5	2	3	372.000	0.007	0.039	0.100
Joe Rug	4	3	1	484.000	0.008	0.047	0.250
Wilbert	5	0	5	450.000	0.007	0.029	0.050
Bassman	6	2	4	1108.000	0.009	0.066	0.033
Owen	4	4	0	202.000	0.008	0.043	0.167
History	1	0	1	0.000	0.006	0.011	0.000
Suomi	4	2	2	240.00	0.006	0.010	0.000
Lihle Icebo	1	1	0	0.000	0.005	0.003	0.000
Guest	1	0	1	0.000	0.005	0.003	0.000
Zhii	1	1	1	0.000	0.005	0.003	0.000
Nyika	1	0	1	0.000	1.000	0.000	0.000
Sammy	1	1	0	0.000	1.000	0.000	0.000
FuturePrez	2	2	0	4.000	0.006	0.012	0.000
Jukwa	4	3	1	275.000	0.007	0.024	0.000
Collin	1	0	1	0.000	0.005	0.006	0.000
Craig	2	0	2	82.000	0.006	0.007	0.000
Kaapstaad	1	0	1	0.000	1.000	0.000	0.000
Roving	1	1	0	0.000	1.000	0.000	0.000
Terminator	1	1	0	0.000	0.005	0.002	0.000
Tovaris	1	1	0	0.000	0.005	0.008	0.000
Tazomama	1	1	0	0.000	0.005	0.008	0.000
Ndabeni	2	1	1	4.000	0.250	0.000	0.000
Truth001	2	2	0	4.000	0.250	0.000	0.000
Truth1	1	0	1	0.000	0.167	0.000	0.000
Pamucha	1	0	1	0.000	0.167	0.000	0.000
Lethal	4	2	2	116.000	0.007	0.018	0.000
Gorongoza	3	2	1	238.000	0.006	0.012	0.000
Moosa	1	0	1	0.000	0.005	0.003	0.000
Messenger	2	0	2	82.000	0.005	0.003	0.000
Mpostori	1	1	0	0.000	0.004	0.001	0.000
Ruwa	5	2	3	26.000	0.143	0.000	0.050
ZimAsset	2	2	0	0.000	0.091	0.000	0.500
Paparay	2	0	2	10.000	0.100	0.000	0.000
Mart	2	1	1	0.000	0.091	0.000	0.500
Mhunhu	1	0	1	0.000	0.083	0.000	0.000
Gabarino	1	1	0	0.000	0.083	0.000	0.000
Polo	1	1	0	0.000	0.005	0.005	0.000
Terry	4	2	2	178.000	0.007	0.024	0.000
Apostle	1	0	1	0.000	0.006	0.006	0.000
Joemuda	3	2	1	2.000	0.500	0.000	0.000
Whyisvm	2	1	1	0.000	0.333	0.000	0.000
Madzimai	1	0	1	0.000	0.333	0.000	0.000
Ian Smith	2	1	1	82.000	0.006	0.026	0.000
Drudge	1	0	1	0.000	0.005	0.007	0.000
Vengesai	1	0	1	0.000	0.006	0.024	0.000
Afrikkan	1	0	1	0.000	0.006	0.024	0.000
Rafique	1	1	0	0.000	0.067	0.000	0.000
DisGrace	2	0	2	37.000	0.007	0.020	0.000

man and Riddle 2005: 8). These central actors or commenters online are more active than others. Other commenters comment in reply to other commenters but not all. The participants shown in Table 1 are most central and active members in the discursive online community. The graph shrinks from the more active to the less.

Clustering coefficient focuses on evaluating the interaction of online participants in terms of their connectivity. It looks at how connected are one's friends (Hansen et al. 2011: 33). The online based community reflects character and personal connectivity. The graph shows 0.000 for other commenters' eigenvector centrality. However, for others commenters the eigenvector centrality ranges from 0.500 to 0.022. This may represent that the messages of a reader with a highest eigenvector centrality are more friendly or abusive. For instance, *Diblo dibala* has the highest eigenvector centrality.

DISCUSSION

The central actors are most dominant in a conversation and attract many responses from other community members. John et al. (2015) mentioned that what differentiates community members is the language they use in conversation. This paper finds out that the most influential actors' posts reflect controversial or argumentative language that provokes debate. Their language is political because they will be commenting on a political news article or another commenter's political comment. The other observation is that the central actors comment frequently and are always online following on replies to their comments. In line with Johnson et al.'s (2015: 33) perspective that the frequent posters use a language that is "prototypical of the community" to attract more reactions, the researcher highlights that commenters online are familiar and updated about the Zimbabwean political or economic situation. Since the comment forum is attached to political and economic news articles, commenters' interaction happens within a discourse provided by the media.

Zhang et al. (2007: 222) mentioned that the online commenters' reply is not based on personality but the interest in content of the topic. This paper finds out that both the interest in the content of the topic and the person who started the comment provokes reaction. There are familiar and well known participants in the forum such as *Rude Chikala*, whose comments are always provocative and anti-MDC. They tend to provoke more pro-MDC commenters who in turn ridicule and insult their intelligence. While the shared interest about the topic between commenters influences the interaction even though the poster and replier have mild differences because they share political beliefs or perspectives towards the issue under discussion

This paper also notes that the online community members use pseudo names as their identities. Myers (2010) said that the users of online blogs and wikis have particular social identities. The use of anonymous names is one the advantages of participation on the forum online as the commenters have to safeguard their real identities. Since the online community is political and involves provocations, participants remain anonymous because their comments maybe offending and infringing other people's rights in a Zimbabwean political sphere. However, personalities online reflect characteristics of the real Zimbabwean political community. Since political parties happen to be the online conventional agenda, commenters show differences in interests, affiliation to political parties and opinion that make their network tense, unfriendly and verbal abusive towards those with a different political opinion.

Moyo and Mathe (2014) in their paper showed that different interests would make community members to avoid interaction. Network analysis of commenters online also show that there is much tension among participants with different interests or political opinions. Mostly the tension erupts between commenters from different political parties such as Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). This shows that there is a political tension between community members from two political groups. Therefore, the network has community members with different opinions from different political gatherings which means commenters attract those alike and get provoked by those unlike.

Majdán's (2012) pointed out that the online community experience the influx of new members. The researcher adds on that the new participants on the comment forum keep on emerging for an unspecified period of time. However, this paper's findings differ with Majdán's (2012: 4), who said that "the influx of new users shows the real nature of a new users on the online com-

munity rather than a discursive one." This paper's main findings are that the discursive nature of the readers' commentary forum is based on the argumentative discourse in response to the news article or comments by other participants. The replies to others comments are normally ridiculous, provoking, degrading when the commenter feels like his or her post is dismissed. Commenters do not normally have a quality conversation but aim to make themselves acceptable and to be heard by others.

CONCLUSION

This paper concludes that participants online post their comments unevenly across news stories and they also reply to each other on the public forum. Their interaction is political because the public forum is attached to political or economic news articles hence their discourse is also political or economic. However not all participants interact, this paper finds out that the online discursive community consists of central or influential actors, whose comments provoke a multiple of responses. Figure 4 illustrates the visual environment of the most influential and less influential commenters that are identifiable by the space they occupy on the diagram. The researcher notes that the results of discursive nature of the online community can change because the online community revolves and keeps on having an influx of new members. Therefore, these results are confined to the community members collected during the time of the study.

The findings of this paper highlight that the political online personalities are mostly abusive, intolerant of political differences and support those who tend to share their interests and beliefs. The researcher finds out that the online community reflects an argumentative discourse in response to news articles and posts by other commenters. The quality conversation online is very low, the commenters are either dismissive of other commenters' opinions or they insult or label their opponents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Since commenters to news articles online constitute a discursive community that broadens the scope of journalism practice in Zimbabwe, this paper recommends that journalists and any interested news consumer should further learn from the discourse of the online community. Reading news only without assessing the behaviour and attitudes of the news audiences does not give a glimpse of news effects or how audiences react to issues published. Media organisations should take note of the reader' feedback to evaluate their editorial or reporting standards.

This paper recommends that political parties or politicians should learn from the perspectives of the commenters in an online community on political issues because commenters may represent the perspectives and beliefs of a physical community on the ground.

The readers' commentary forum acts as a public sphere where a community member can voice out without restrictions or censorship, hence taking into considerations their constructive criticism it could help for proactive or reactive solutions.

Learning from the dynamic of the network of commenters online and how they relate in respect to their shared interests in the topic and influential personalities can enlighten or help to solve political and social problems faced by the real physical community. This paper recommends that the communities should exercise political tolerance, appreciation of other community members' perspectives without negative labelling and also have cordial relations or agreeably arguments between ZANU-PF and MDC groups.

LIMITATIONS

The main challenge of this paper is that most commenters are largely based outside the country Zimbabwe. The participants are anonymous in the sense that they use pseudo names though this might be both an advantage and a loophole for the study. Anonymity is an advantage in the sense that it allows the participants to express themselves freely. This may also be the reason why caution is required as they may not be reliable sources. For example, there is a possibility that one of the participants might have morphed into several online identities and the online commentary forum does not show the location for the commenter.

FOR FUTURE STUDIES

The commenters use google registered accounts and have anonymous identities but they can be contacted online if the researcher needs

them to clarify on their comments and share on how they relate with other community members. Therefore, the researcher suggests a study that would involve interviews online with the commenter. The researcher also suggests a conversational analysis that would completely analyse why commenters burst into insults and how they tend to be emotional in a conversation. This would be achievable if the researcher could find time to follow posts and replies in an online discursive community.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The researcher would like to acknowledge the Govan Mbeki Research and Development Centre (GMRDC) for supporting the publication of this paper.

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Paper received for publication on September 2015
Paper accepted for publication on December 2016