

Abstract

Media policy reform in Zimbabwe should be able to liberate rather than limit the public sphere long “captured” by narrow interest of the ruling class before and after independence in 1980. While some authors have regarded media activism as critical in the creation of the public sphere, not much is known beyond this particular materialistic aspect. The wider importance of media activism to the fight for media reform and democracy in Zimbabwe is ignored in literature. In addition, media activism in Zimbabwe has not been adequately documented leading to little understanding of the practice. Against this background, the study seeks to ascertain the degree and extent to which media activism has led to media reform and democratisation in Zimbabwe through the lens of Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and the Social movement theory of Resource Mobilisation (RMT).

Using personal interviews, the examination of media activists and government documents, and journalists’ articles, this study examines the extent to which media activism influences media reform and democracy in Zimbabwe. The study argues that major debates over the democratisation of communication in Zimbabwe are pitted between the hegemonic government and the counter-hegemonic media reform activists sponsored by Western based donors such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Article 19 among others. The highlights of the debate indicate differences in conceptualisation of “media democracy” between the the state and media reform activist organisations. While media reform activists define media democracy from a transplanted Westernised democracy concept, the government rejects such deterministic approaches to media democracy and argues that media democracy in Africa must not be tied to Western manufactured models but must be informed by the socio-cultural, economic and political needs of the society. The government perceives Western funded media reform activists as conduits for regime change. In the end, the study noted a number of media reforms influenced by media reform activists. However, these reforms did not democratise communication in Zimbabwe as they were either not implemented or appropriated by the government which uses them to further consolidate its hegemonic power. The research recommends that media reform activists and the government should seek a common understanding on issues which involve democratised communication.

