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Intersections of Citizen Journalism, Social Media Watchdogism, and Citizen Surveillance of the State and Political Elites in Zimbabwe's 2023 Elections

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Abstract: The August 2023 elections in Zimbabwe, just like the previous 2013 and 2018 elections, were characterized by extensive use of social media for political journalism purposes. Specifically, Twitter, WhatsApp, and YouTube have been widely used by citizens to report party presidential and parliamentary candidates' election campaigns. The ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and opposition Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) parties and their presidential and parliamentary candidates' campaign reportage are the main focus here. Whereas there is much scholarship on political journalism, social media and political communication, and social media and citizen journalism in Zimbabwe, there is a dearth of scholarship that theorizes the intersections of citizen journalism, the watchdog role of social media and citizens' use of social media to conduct surveillance on the state, political candidates and/or political elites in electoral contexts. The current article thus seeks to fill that void by deploying the concepts of citizen journalism, (social) media watchdogism and (citizen) surveillance to interrogate how citizens utilized social media as a journalistic tool in the run up and aftermath of the 2023 electoral campaign. Data was gathered through archival research and virtual ethnography whilst findings were analyzed through thematic analysis.

Key Words: Surveillance, Citizen Journalism, Zimbabwe, Elections, mobile phone

Introduction

It has long been held that state-sponsored political violence in Zimbabwe took a turn for the worse when the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) emerged in 1999. Consequently, there have been lots of studies focusing on post-2000 electoral violence.[1] It is arguable that this spike in state-sponsored political violence was accompanied by heightened state surveillance of citizens. In effect, such surveillance is itself a form of violence.[2] It "involves the collection, storage, processing and assessment of data about humans or groups of humans by an actor in order to advance the latter's goals by violence exerted with the help of the collected information upon the humans under watch."[3] It involves watching or monitoring one's activities in different contexts.[4] In Zimbabwe, the state surveils civil society, perceived pro-opposition churches, independent media journalists, political activists, opposition parties, ruling party officials, military generals, academics, and students.[5]

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Surveillance has been broadened and enhanced by new media or digital technologies. This is also true in Zimbabwe where the government in collusion with mobile network providers—especially those linked to the state—easily tracks or surveils citizens and, in times of demonstrations, shuts down the internet.[6] For example, in collusion with mobile networks, the government partially blocked (August 2018) and completely shut down (January 2018) internet services. Mobile technologies have thus enabled both governments and companies to improve and increase their surveillance capabilities.[7] Indeed, studies of surveillance in Zimbabwe are recent but these have largely focused on state and company surveillance of citizens and/or consumers for power retention and profit respectively.[8] In Zimbabwe, research on digital surveillance is scarce.[9] Some argue that "digital forms of surveillance have worsened the surveillance of journalists because they are hard to detect."[10] Lately, studies have also turned their focus on self-surveillance.[11] Kang et al. state, "it has become cliché to observe that new information technologies endanger privacy. Typically, the threat is viewed as coming from Big Brother (the government) or Company Man (the firm). But for a nascent data practice we call 'self-surveillance,' the threat may actually come from ourselves."[12] This is a view also held by other scholars who argue that surveillance "is increasingly turning inwards—an internalized surveillance—that is part of a growing trend of decentralized practices of individual and group monitoring through portable hand-held devices, principally the mobile phone."[13]

However, this article argues that as much as these new technologies endanger the privacy of individuals, they also provide an opportunity for 'netizens' to embark on surveillance of elites and state actors (both individuals and institutions). In other words, the same digital technologies that pose a danger to individual privacy also provide opportunities for bottom-up surveillance. Through digital media and social media platforms, individuals can fulfill the watchdog role of the media through the twin exercises of elite surveillance and citizen journalism. Consequently, using the August 2023, Zimbabwean elections as a case study, the article examines the intersections of citizen journalism, citizen surveillance of elites, and social media watchdogism in a semi-authoritarian context. Whereas some scholars study the military's use of digital technologies to carry out surveillance on citizens, this article interrogates citizens' use of digital technologies (primarily mobile communication technologies and social media platforms) to simultaneously practice bottom-up surveillance of the elites, citizen journalism, and social media watchdogism.[14] It examines citizens' use of digital technologies and platforms at their disposal to monitor or conduct surveillance on the state and political elites. The intention is to answer the following questions: How did citizens use digital surveillance and citizen journalism to watch or monitor the ruling political elites and the state in a contested 2023 Zimbabwean electoral context? At what point did surveillance become citizen journalism and social media watchdogism? In what ways is citizen surveillance of the elite and state institutions/actors different from state surveillance of the ordinary citizens?

Surveillance, Citizen Journalism and Media Watchdogism

The use of handheld devices, such as cameras and more recently mobile phones, to document and expose human rights abuses is a decades-long practice. The 1991 Rodney King case—in which a bystander videotaped his beating by Los Angeles police officers—and the 1992 establishment of the Witness Project to expose "through video footage, human rights abuses

around the world and making these public and available to the appropriate authorities" are viewed as key moments in the emergence bottom-up surveillance.[15] Surveillance and citizen journalism have an intertwined history. It is also arguable, that the two processes intersect at some point with citizen journalists appropriating surveillance to fulfill a watchdog role. In other words, digital technologies have broadened or expanded the range of players who can utilize surveillance beyond just the state and businesses. Ordinary citizens can also now deploy surveillance on elites.

Furthermore, digital technologies have also expanded those that can fulfill the watchdog role that was previously assigned to mainstream media through its conceptualization as the Fourth Estate.[16] The idea of the media as the fourth estate, "is…that the press and mass media hold other institutions to account by reporting on their activities, thereby becoming a political force for more pluralistic governance."[17] In this role, the media prevents "political leaders from doing things that should not be done."[18] Thus, the conceptualization of social media as the Fifth Estate gives them the same monitorial role as conventional media.[19] This monitorial role also entails surveillance—however, unlike mainstream media journalists that are limited by ethical considerations or other professional limitations in their collection of news or data, citizen journalists and/or private individuals using social media and the internet to disseminate information do not have similar obligations. For example, the Witness Project's footage was collected secretly by amateur camera people in authoritarian contexts. These amateurs were arguably activist citizen journalists simultaneously conducting surveillance and journalism. In recording and publicizing the elite human rights abusers, the Witness Project intended to hold them to account. This is one of the key functions of the media as watchdog—to hold elites accountable for their actions. This watchdog role makes ethical and legal surveillance on the elite by the media a key feature of journalism.

The advent of digital technologies and social media broadened the range of watchdogs to include those now known as the Fifth Estate.[20] As the Fourth Estate, conventional media's job was to hold the executive, the legislature, and judiciary to account. Similarly, "the Fifth Estate is also a potentially potent political force, but without the centralized institutional foundations of the Fourth Estate. It is composed of the distributed activities of many individuals acting largely on their own in a more decentralized, networked fashion."[21] These "many individuals" consist of citizen journalists and/or ordinary people and activists. Citizen journalism is produced by people who have no formal journalism training.[22] It is these ordinary people that, with the help of social media platforms and digital technologies such as the mobile phone, have turned social media into a fifth estate. As the fifth estate, they are expected not only to hold the first three estates accountable but to also hold conventional media accountable.

In the foregoing context, it is worthwhile to interrogate the intersections of citizen journalism, social media watchdogism, and citizen surveillance. This area has been neglected by scholars. Many studies have tended to examine citizen journalism's interactions or intersections with conventional journalism.[23] Some mainly covered the state's surveillance of citizens.[24] Others examined self-surveillance.[25] This article seeks to interrogate the intersections of what Wall calls, "digital citizen journalism"—bottom-up surveillance and social media watchdogism.[26] The focus is on news produced by non-professionals and circulated via the platforms X (formerly Twitter) and WhatsApp. The non-professionals whose content is the

subject of inquiry in this article are ordinary citizens, political activists, and politicians. This is because, "…citizen journalism is defined as news content (text, video, audio, interactives, etc.) produced by non-professionals. Such content may capture a single moment (e.g., witnessing an event), be intermittent (e.g., a Twitter feed) …"[27] Citizen journalism is participatory and oppositional.[28] Hence, some scholars view the social media platforms that gave rise to accelerated citizen journalism as alterative media. It is also known as open source, guerrilla journalism, and networked journalism.[29] Some citizen journalists are also citizen (political) activists.[30] The focus of this study is original content produced by citizen journalists and not content curated from conventional media by 'gate watching' citizen journalists.[31] The study also focuses on the activities of 'Twitter citizen journalists' and the 'one-off witnesses.'[32] The intention is to establish how citizens monitored elites, the point at which surveillance became citizen journalism and media watchdogism, and differences between citizen surveillance and state surveillance.

The Zimbabwean Surveillance Context

It is usually the state that spies on its citizens. Spying on citizens, including journalists, is an activity carried out by democratic, semi-authoritarian, and authoritarian states.[33] Zimbabwe is no exception and studies of surveillance have tended to focus on top-down or state-driven surveillance practices. First, studies focus on the deployment of state security agents on the university campus to surveil students and academics.[34] Second, they examine the state's enactment of surveillance laws and how these have affected journalism.[35] Thirdly, some study military-driven digital surveillance of citizens, civil society, perceived pro-opposition churches, independent media journalists, political activists, and the opposition.[36] Even journalists employed in state-controlled media are not spared, especially considering that military generals and ruling party officials are also surveilled.[37]

In the case of Zimbabwe, digital technologies have led to increased surveillance by the state: "the ZDF [Zimbabwe Defense Force] has incrementally amassed digital surveillance capabilities that allow it to engage in extrajudicial digital surveillance using various tactics."[38] This surveillance is enabled by Chinese startup technology companies and is spurred on by factionalism in the ruling party and the military's desire to safeguard ZANU PF rule.[39] This context is characterized by "a hardening military-driven political authoritarianism."[40] It is a scenario that leads to "the interests of political actors…materializing in digital surveillance practices in ways that are leading to a militarization of civilian spaces and a civilianization of military surveillance."[41]

Not only have digital technologies enhanced the surveillance capabilities of the state, they have also led to the expansion of targets of surveillance or enemies to be monitored.[42] Since surveillance is arguably "violence exerted with the help of the collected information upon the humans under watch" digital technologies have widened the targets of state-sanctioned violence in both democratic and non-democratic contexts.[43] However, it is crucial to note that the state has no monopoly over surveillance or over the definition of targets of surveillance. The same digital technologies that enabled the state to widen targets of surveillance or enemies to be monitored have also inadvertently turned the state and state actors into targets of bottom-up surveillance. In the digital age, citizens can also define their enemies and take steps to conduct

surveillance on them either as a safety measure or as a counter-hegemonic strategy. The Witness Project is an example of such a scenario where metaphorically speaking, the hunter became the hunted.[44]

In the post-2000 Zimbabwe context—characterized by vote rigging, electoral violence, and abduction of opposition political activists, amongst other electoral malpractices—citizens sympathetic to the opposition consider the state and the ruling political elites as their enemies. Whereas the state engages in surveillance to safeguard its power, citizens seek protection from an especially overbearing state. In such a scenario, citizen surveillance of the state enabled by digital media arguably becomes a safety measure aimed at self-preservation.

Conceptual Framework

The article utilizes insights gleaned from the concepts of citizen journalism, watchdog journalism, and sousveillance or bottom-up surveillance or virtual vigilantism. Citizen journalism is a result of citizen grassroots surveillance in which incidents have been recorded on mobile phones and shared by individuals.[45] From citizen grassroots surveillance "emerged the phenomenon known as citizen journalism where recent urban crises have been recorded on mobile phones by the individuals involved."[46] These forms of surveillance are also variously known as virtual vigilantism or participatory panopticon or bottom-up surveillance or sousveillance.[47] Denis argues that this form of surveillance is usually used as a form of "community punishment." One such example of community punishment is the recording and circulation of phone images on the internet or social media as a way of disgracing perpetrators of human rights abuses.[48] The extent to which this strategy of community punishment is utilized in Zimbabwe will be explored below.

Sousveillance is vigilance towards the self or towards others and it is characterized by 'watchfulness'.[49] In this article, sousveillance is the documenting of everyday encounters between the ordinary people and state actors or political elites and their minions. It means self-monitoring and monitoring the other to expose human rights violations perpetrated against the self and the other. However, sousveillance is non-linear (rhizomatic) and doesn't have structures of enforcement. Publishing information gathered through bottom-up surveillance is a way of trying to induce enforcement. This is different from state surveillance as the state does have structures of enforcement. In the wrong hands sousveillance can be "turned into harassment, stalking, voyeurism, and intrusion."[50] This notwithstanding, the purpose of sousveillance is to dissuade the state from doing what it ought not to do. This too is the goal of social media's watchdog role or the fifth estate.[51] In this role, it prevents "political leaders from doing things that should not be done."[52] The difference with conventional media as the fourth estate is the decentralized and networked nature of social media.[53] In addition, conventional journalists are formally trained whilst social media's watchdog role is participatory and executed by non-professionals—the citizen journalists.[54]

Methodology

The study is interpretive as it draws meanings from the bottom-up digital surveillance strategies utilized by ordinary citizens and activists in a semi-authoritarian electoral context.

Zimbabwe is a state where the institutions of democracy are in place but they are undermined by or are sub-servient to the ruling political elite.[55] These institutions are weak and elections are an embedded ritual.[56] In other words, the country goes through the motions of electoral democracy but without the elections being democratic.[57] This study deployed ethnographic methods because it is interested in generating thick descriptions.[58] It also views the internet and social media as a site of fieldwork.[59] These ethnographic methods of data gathering include in-depth interviews, observations, life histories, document analysis, and archival research.[60] Data was purposively selected from Twitter and WhatsApp and archived in the month leading up to the 23 August 2023 elections. Simultaneously, non-participant virtual ethnography was used to gather data. Ethnography applied in online communication and online relationships "overcome[s] the usual time space restrictions associated with traditional ethnographic work (i.e. the need for the ethnographer to be in the same location at the same time as the study participants)."[61]

The author passively observed Twitter and WhatsApp groups, collecting and archiving data and recording interactions. Research questions determine what is observed and archived, what is included or excluded. The researcher can then create his or her own archive as done for this study. The decision to archive or not archive and to observe and record or not to observe and record is also subject to ethical considerations such as the right to privacy and informed consent. Central to the ethical issues in social media research is the need to understand that privacy is contextual because, "at the heart of the issue are fundamental misunderstandings concerning the contextual nature of privacy in online social media."[62] For example, the methods of data collection utilized in this study might come across as surveillance, but media scholars argue that the greater good that is realized from the endeavor outweighs the concerns. In other words, research is conducted in the public interest, and this makes online archival research or non-participant virtual ethnography permissible.[63] The data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Thick descriptions were possible because by its very nature, ethnographic data "produce[s] detailed and comprehensive accounts of different social phenomena."[64]

In the process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation, the researcher remained reflexive given past experience with the research problem. A researcher's previous experience with the research problem or research participants and how these may shape a researcher's interpretation of phenomenon under study should produce such reflexivity.[65] The author supervised undergraduate and postgraduate student dissertations that focused on social media and also published several journal articles on social media. In this study, past experiences with social media research partially shaped the questions that the present study sought to answer. The sections below present the findings thematically.

Use of Public Data to Monitor the State and Ruling Elite

The findings showed that pro-opposition CCC groups and individuals utilized algorithms and big data to monitor state institutions and the ruling elite. Big data and algorithms used to expose alleged gerrymandering of constituency and ward boundaries long after gazetting of the delimitation report by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC). For example, on 22 July 2022 Team Pachedu @PacheduZW charged that, "Zec has illegally changed the final gazetted

delimitation boundaries in Mt Darwin, Mash Central. 2459 voters in Pfura Ward 6 have been illegally moved from Mt Darwin West Constituency to Mt Darwin East. This violates the constitution of Zimbabwe. Zec must be sued."[66] The citizens also used publicly available data to expose alleged voter roll manipulation by ZEC. The manipulation allegedly included populating the voter roll with fake voters. For example, on 02 August 2023 @TeamPachedu and Lisah Ncube, a pro-CCC citizen, tweeted a sample of fake identification numbers on their respective handles. In addition, on the same day publicly available data were also used to expose discrepancies in polling station numbers whilst on 21 July 2023 the same publicly available data and digital tools were used to expose addresses with unusually high numbers of voters. For example, Team Pachedu @PacheduZW exposed the address of a single house in Harare with 275 voters registered as resident there and concludes by saying, "In 2018 there was no voter at this address. Candidates investigate!"[67]

Opposition and pro-opposition individuals and groups utilized election results posted at voting stations to conduct a parallel voter tabulation process that they argued was meant to guard against potential manipulation of results by ZEC and ZANU-PF. Opposition party agents collected the data from their respective stations by using their phones to take pictures of the results and sending them via social media platforms to pro-opposition volunteers like Freeman Chari and colleagues who developed an application called Mandla to tabulate the votes. On 23 August and 24 August both Whatsapp and X were awash with screenshots and typed messages of results at various polling stations from across the country.

The collection and sharing via social media platforms with netizens outside the country who were using the Mandla application to collate the data, was intended to surveil ZEC, the ruling party, and government. Public sharing was intended to make the state and government feel the glare of not only citizens but also regional and international publics, states, and institutions that had a keen interest in the elections. The intention was also to make the state feel the technological gaze. In other words, citizens and/or activists wanted it known that they were surveilling the ruling elite and election counting with the help of digital tools. The intention was thus to make the state, government, and ruling party know that it is not business as usual: citizens now also have surveillance capabilities of their own.

Team Pachedu, a pro-CCC group, carried out much of this digital surveillance and they relied largely on digitally available data. The material gathered from their digital surveillance was not shared privately with the opposition CCC but was instead splashed all over social media. This is the point at which bottom-up surveillance assumes a citizen journalism identity. However, it is a type of citizen journalism that is counter hegemonic. In its very public nature this type of bottom-up surveillance is different from the military-driven surveillance in which data is shared with commanders who not only discuss it in the Joint Operations Command (JOC) but also use it to help the ruling party craft strategies to counter the opposition.[68]

The Mobile Phone as Surveillance Technology

A key feature of surveillance from below is reliance on the mobile phone for data gathering or surveillance. In other words, the smartphone is the eyes and ears through which electoral misdeeds by the elite are captured—whilst data, network connectivity, and social media are the safety nets and reservoirs in which they are transmitted and stored. Such data is not safe if it

remains in the phone without being transmitted because the phone may be seized, destroyed or the content deleted. So quickly capturing and transmitting to multiple recipients and one's social media in real time is an insurance against abuse and other electoral malpractices. For example, Fadzai Mahere (CCC candidate for Mount Pleasant) posted to X on 25 August 2023 a video of CCC polling agents trailing a ZEC vehicle on its way to the Constituency Command Centre "to ensure that there is no stuffing of postal ballots or other electoral malpractices."[69] This very public form of surveillance-cum-citizen journalism serves two purposes: firstly, to make the target know that those conducting the surveillance know about their nefarious intentions and secondly; to bring public gaze (both local and international) upon the alleged electoral malpractices. This should be understood in a context where the ruling elite—even though they do not want to subject themselves to the inconveniences of electoral democracy—also want the benefits of electoral democracy such as legitimacy derived from the people. Similarly, on 20 August 2023 opposition activists and pro-opposition villagers recorded and shared on social media (WhatsApp and X) a video of alleged members of the ZANU-PF linked group Forever Associates of Zimbabwe (FAZ), which was allegedly the key driver behind rigging and voter intimidation. The alleged FAZ members were recorded going around Chimanimani West Constituency intimidating villagers into voting for ZANU-PF. The mobile phone was also used to record both videos and images of police barring opposition CCC election rallies at Chiredzi and Gutu on 6 and 7 July 2023, respectively.

On election day, surveillance of the ruling elites and their agents by opposition activists and pro-opposition citizens was at its peak. The whole day was characterized by sharing of images and videos of ZANU-PF members who set up desks a few hundred meters from polling stations across the country. The opposition alleged this was meant to intimidate voters by FAZ whilst ZANU PF, through its X handle @ZANUPF Patriots, claimed, "It's just an exit poll survey!!! Hapana kana (there is no) difference with CCC supporters collecting data at polling stations which will be send to @Pachedu and Freeman Chari. The desks are more than 300m and far from the polling stations."[70] This surveillance on polling stations extended to identifying and sharing polling stations across the country where voting was delayed due to the unavailability of ballot papers. These were also circulated via WhatsApp and X. ZANU PF conducted its own surveillance of the voting process via the 'exit poll survey' but unlike opposition activists and supporters, they did not splash this on social media. Neither did they share any information about their surveillance of the opposition even though the exit survey could be construed as such. Indeed, in previous elections—especially the infamous and violent 2008 election—such desks were used to note those who voted for ZANU and those who did not.[71] The consequences of not voting for the ruling party were potentially dangerous and as such, the desks were associated with voter intimidation that could even spiral into post-election violence.

Facial Recognition as a Citizen Digital Surveillance Strategy

Facial recognition strategies are also utilized in bottom-up surveillance. While the military in Zimbabwe uses facial recognition software as a surveillance tool, opposition activists, supporters, and politicians rely on fellow citizens for facial recognition.[72] In other words, their software and data base are the people. This strategy is widely used amongst opposition activists

and netizens. It is a refined version of the method police used in the analog age where they would post images of wanted suspects in newspapers and on television. appealing to the public to call the police if they had information on their whereabouts. This strategy has been used to unmask law enforcement agents, military and intelligence officers and ruling party activists accused of human rights violations. Usually their names, ranks, stations, and phone numbers are provided with an appeal to citizens to inundate them with calls asking why they committed such acts. However, for those in Zimbabwe within the reach of the repressive state apparatus, taking up the advice to call exposes one to arrest and prosecution. X is favored by activists and citizens for this strategy. For example, CCC politicians, activists, and pro-CCC citizens widely reported on X and WhatsApp the disruption of their press conference on 26 August 2023 and an attempt to abduct their spokesperson Promise Mkwananzi. Another CCC activist, Makomborero Haruzivishe, later posted two pictures of the men that allegedly wanted to abduct Mkwananzi. He said, "Here are photos of two the thugs. REPOST THEM, SOMEONE ON YOUR TIMELINE MIGHT RECOGNISE AND IDENTIFY THEM."[73]

The above form of bottom-up surveillance was also used as a form of community punishment.[74] The recording and circulation of images on social media is a way of disgracing perpetrators of human rights abuses. It is a form of 'virtual vigilantism' as alleged perpetrators' images are not shared online for purposes of facial recognition only. The images are also shared as a way of publicly humiliating the perpetrators or subjecting them to instant mob justice through insults, name calling, labelling, and in extreme cases, disturbance through incessant calls. However, it is here where sousveillance may become harassment and intrusion.[75]

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings above show that in Zimbabwe there has been a weaponization or instrumentalization of surveillance by citizens and citizen journalists. There is a blurring of distinctions between political activism and citizen journalism. This has indeed been the case from the days of the Witness Project.[76] Similarly, these findings confirm that citizen journalism is participatory and oppositional because it was mainly deployed by citizens opposed to the ruling elite.[77] However, this study also shows that citizen journalism is no longer disruptive. This is because in semi-authoritarian contexts citizen journalism can become more monitorial than conventional media and is not bound by ethics. Journalists, including citizen journalists, may be arrested for surreptitiously recording an official at work. But citizen journalists are not subject to the demands of journalism. Nevertheless, they still do fulfill the watchdog role of the media.

However, unlike conventional media watchdogism and 'traditional' citizen journalism, the public interest is subordinated to political interest. The goal is to demonstrate the illegitimacy of a certain political party by exposing its malpractices. In this context, surveillance-cum-citizen journalism-cum-political activism is designed and/or weaponized to achieve political goals. The citizens have appropriated the usual state and corporate practice of surveillance and intermarried it with the subaltern, participatory, and oppositional citizen journalism to advance a counter-hegemonic project. It is thus arguable that the state no-longer has monopoly over the disciplinary power of surveillance—citizens have, to an extent, appropriated a part of this power. For example, the use of community punishment or virtual vigilantism against security

officers allegedly responsible for beatings and abductions is testimony to this.[78] The state has lost its monopoly over surveillance and there is a need to re-think the state's disciplinary power. Future studies should investigate this.

It is clear that surveillance has become a counter-hegemonic tool in Zimbabwe. Prior to the advent of digital communications, it was the preserve of the state. Scholars have noted that digital technologies increased state surveillance over journalists and citizens.[79] This study, however, shows that surveillance is no longer the preserve of the state as citizens, courtesy of digital technologies, can now also surveil state institutions and the ruling political elite. Surveillance—which some scholars consider as violence—is also being deployed against the ruling elite.[80] There seems to be very little citizen surveillance of the political opposition, perhaps because violence is largely perpetrated by the state which has monopoly over the use of legitimate force. The appropriation by citizens of instruments that were previously the preserve of the ruling elite perhaps explains why, like the state which has been accused of perpetrating illegalities, subalterns are willing to perpetrate illegalities against state functionaries accused of human rights abuses. It perhaps explains why they hide behind social media pseudonymity and the safety of exile to harass those accused by the citizens of such abuses. In exacting community punishment, they are often more than willing to break the law, especially through harassment via incessant calls. This is a weapon available to the diaspora since those domiciled in Zimbabwe can be easily tracked down, arrested, and prosecuted because mobile phone lines are registered.

Surveillance by the state and business is covert and meant for strategic decision-making. The information gathered is not meant for public consumption. However, bottom-up surveillance conducted in precarious authoritarian and semi-authoritarian contexts by ordinary citizens or political activists can be both secret and very public. The intention is usually to deter the state or to limit its excesses. It may also be used to force the state to release abducted activists. Whereas the bottom-up surveillance that the Witness Project used was secret, this study shows that there are moments when citizen surveillance of the elite is deliberately very open and public.[81] This could, apart from the above, be also explained by the fact that surveillance using cameras in the analog era of the Witness Project did not have the same capabilities as digital surveillance now has. With the mobile phone one can record and upload quickly or livestream when sensing danger, allowing the camera to roll as the human rights abuses occur. This strategy is used in Zimbabwe by opposition activists and politicians. This may dissuade the perpetrators or may act as a safety net by enabling the world to know that one has been taken. This has been utilized in the Zimbabwean context especially since some activists—such as Itai Dzamara—have disappeared without a trace.

Finally, this study also demonstrates that in semi-authoritarian contexts where access to government-held information is not easy, the mobile phone, social media, and big data are central to surveillance from below. They are also used to watch over the state by exposing its misdeeds. But unlike in conventional media where watchdogism is performed to hold the elite to account, in bottom-up surveillance-cum-citizen journalism its intent is to score political goals. Media watchdogism becomes a counter-hegemonic tool used by the citizens and the opposition to undermine the ruling party and government. The intention is to push out government and replace it with one pro-opposition citizens prefer. Surveillance from below is characteristically

not coordinated, though there was an attempt at coordination during the voter tabulation process by activists such as Freeman Chari utilizing the Mandla application. For data they relied on the opposition CCC political party election agents and ordinary pro-opposition citizens with access to a smart phone. The lack of coordination noted in surveillance from below is different from the lack of coordination between various military units that some scholars note.[82]

Based on the foregoing, the article concludes that digital technologies have not only widened top-down or state or corporate surveillance of citizens, but they also brought an unintended consequence: citizen surveillance of the state and ruling elite. Thus, this article argues that bottom-up surveillance-cum-citizen journalism is a counter-hegemonic tool that is used by subalterns to exert violence on the elite in a bid to score political goals. In bottom-up surveillance, citizens also combine the strategies of facial recognition and community punishment against state functionaries. Their data bases are the people. Whereas the state deploys its institutions to deal with the targets of its surveillance, the people rely on digital citizens to punish perpetrators through virtual vigilantism among other strategies.

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