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Facebook as an alternative public sphere: Online Discussions of Bond notes in Zimbabwe

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother Amai Tobias Mandoreba and the entire Mandoreba family.

ABSTRACT

The research examines social media as an alternative public sphere. Special attention is paid to Facebook, a social networking site, which opened up online spaces for public dialogue on Bond notes, a surrogate currency in Zimbabwe, in 2016. Using *The Herald Facebook Page* as a case study, the research drew insights from a number of scholars on the notion of public sphere, among them Habermas and Fraser in order to study the extent and manner in which Zimbabweans' use of Facebook to deliberate the introduction of Bond notes constructed a digital public sphere. It was observed that Facebook conforms to several Habermas ideals of a public sphere. The online platform provides a conducive and favorable environment for public discussions because it is fashioned with a number of features capable of facilitating debate. While the online public sphere has limitations, these mainly differed from those of the physical public sphere in the extent to which they manifest. Further researches on social media as an alternative public sphere in Zimbabwe may be conducted with special attention to other social media sites like WhatsApp and Twitter.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Participation in social media has grown at a tremendous pace as social media provide alternative means of communication which melt down the physical barriers to interaction. The most used form of social media are social networking sites (SNSs) which allow their users to participate in both information generation and information consumption senders and receivers of content, hence SNSs are designed in a special way which enable dialogic conversation among users. These include Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, MySpace and many others. According to Masuku and Moyo (2014) a multitude of people participate in SNSs at different times and for accomplishing various agendas ranging from economic, social and political ones. The continuous growth and developments in the realm of SNSs is a clear testimony of how they have become part and parcel of human life such that in this digital world, social media has become an unavoidable phenomenon in human existence. It is interesting to note that in this digital era, different people at different stations use social networking sites for various communicative purposes.

The research examines Facebook as an alternative public sphere. Special attention is directed towards the Facebook Page application since the social networking site (SNS) is very broad and constitutes a litany of features which enable it to serve as a site for public discussions. Observations have been made on *The Herald Facebook Page* with the researcher examining how the platform was utilised for the discussions about Bond notes. Key issues which qualify Facebook as a digital arena for public discourse are observed. The research also observes limitations of Facebook as a public sphere.

This chapter provides a brief background of study. The background of study contextualises the research. In addition, the chapter states the research problem where knowledge gap on the subject of social media as a public sphere is identified. Research objectives are also elucidated. Significance of study as well as definition of key terms are also proffered in this chapter.

1.2 Background of study

In 2016 the Zimbabwean economy faced a critical challenge of cash shortage and decline in economic activity. Long winding queues were the order of the day and were acute from July to November 2016 with the country's primary currency, the US dollar, becoming scarce in the market. Resultantly, there was no smooth circulation of cash, largely blamed on the country's huge imports against low exports perpetrated by market players especially businesses and consumers. This resulted in the government's proposal to introduce Bond notes, which became legal tender in the country on 28 November 2016 with the hope of reviving the dying economy. According to the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (RBZ), Bond notes were also introduced in line with the Export Incentive Scheme aimed at incentivising exporters. Interestingly the issue concerning the introduction of Bond notes in Zimbabwe stirred great debates among various parties in the country. The issue became one of the burning issues in 2016 Zimbabwe. According to Kawadza (2016), any poll on most burning issues in Zimbabwe for 2016 throughout most print and online media platforms would easily pick the proposed Bond notes issue as the obvious and discernible winner. Thus, any form of private discussions, whether social or religious generally ended with the subject of Bond notes.

Nevertheless, the initiative was received with mixed feelings which witnessed citizens, even those in diaspora, taking to social media to express their diversified views towards the move. Some political opposition parties, such as the Movement for Democratic Party, civil rights organisations, business sectors and political activist groups like the #ThisFlag and #Tajamuka/Sesijikile argued that Bond notes represented a clandestine return to the once economically troubled Zimbabwean Dollar. Other parties such as the incumbent ruling party, the Zimbabwe African National Unity –Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), and its supporters embraced the move considering it as a therapy to the country's problem of cash shortages and economic challenges in general. The period witnessed street demonstrations against Bond notes as well as massive social media campaigns for and against the initiative.

It is crucial for one to note that the various opinions concerning Bond notes were aired via social media, particularly through Facebook due to its ability in enabling global connectivity. According to Kawadza (2016), of all discussion forums for Bond notes, social media has proved

to be the major platform upon which the issue of Bond notes was deliberated upon. This witnessed the emergence of unidentifiable social media accounts haranguing the RBZ governor, Dr J. Mangudya and other top government officials. It is mainly through Facebook that people shared various viewpoints about Bond notes. This witnessed the emergence of satiric discourses which circulated across various social media platforms concerning Bond notes. Thus, people expressed their dislike of Bond notes through humour. This can be exemplified by the circulation of a social media joke where everything deemed of poor quality was equated to Bond notes (see Appendix A). Dislike of Bond notes has also been expressed through the satiric joke which circulated on the supposedly new drug called *bondmoxazol* meant to prevent the coming of Bond notes (see Appendix B). This shows the extent to which social media played a greater part in the sharing of various opinions concerning Bond notes. One therefore saw it befitting to examine how social media platforms act as an alternative arena where public debates on crucial matters take place. Social media has therefore played a significant part in spreading various discourses on Bond notes. However, the current study specifically focus on Facebook and how it acted as a public sphere for public deliberations on Bond notes.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

The notion of public sphere emerged during the pre-Internet era. However, we are now living in a digital world where internet seems to have penetrated every sphere of human existence. Therefore, there is need for an understanding of public sphere in the digital sense since social media sites act as new discussion forums in the cyberspace. Previous research on social media as an alternative public sphere is still fresh and very little has been done in the Zimbabwean context. The research seeks to enhance an understanding of the subject in the Zimbabwean context with special attention on Facebook. The impact of social networking sites as discussion forums is felt in the four corners of the world and in Zimbabwe Facebook is the most conducive discussion forum for public discourse on Bond notes.

1.4 Objectives of the study

The research seeks to:

- Examine the amenability of the Facebook Page application to public discussions on Bond notes.

- Analyse key points on Bond notes discussion on Facebook.
- Identify the limitations of Facebook as a public sphere.

1.5 Significance of Study

The study seeks to add value to the already existing body of knowledge on how social media function as an alternative public sphere. However, specific focus is on Facebook since social media is a broad phenomenon which cannot be explored all at once. The birth of the internet witnessed the subsequent birth of social networking sites which provide alternative discussion forums where the public converge in cyberspace to deliberate on matters of common interest. Therefore, the research seeks to add an understanding on how social media function as an alternative public sphere in a digitally connected society.

The research also extends an understanding of media studies in general as it highlights the extent to which social media has subverted the traditional communication processes. Traditional media, for instance print newspapers, do not allow effective communication dialogue to take place among participants. An understanding of social media as an alternative public sphere provides an insight into how media audiences have been empowered to air their views in an online media environment. This highlights the extent to which this alternative communication forum revolutionised the media landscape in terms of audience engagement.

An examination of online social media conversations also extends an understanding of discourse in the digital environment. Through an examination of the public discussion of key points on Bond notes on *The Herald Facebook Page*, one will have an understanding of why people employ certain kinds of language during public dialogue and understand the relationship that exists between the topic under discussion and the language used. Furthermore, the current research provides insights into the extent to which the issue of Bond notes was significant and sensitive to the majority of Zimbabweans including those in diaspora.

1.6 Definition of key terms

Public Sphere---online or off-line arena for public discussions.

Social Media—modern-day internet based communication platforms which allow users to be

both information encoders and decoders. Forms of social media include social networking sites, blogs, wikis, podcasts and content communities.

Social Networking Sites---form of social media used mainly for online social interaction for example Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter.

Facebook---social networking site for social interaction in the cyberspace.

Liking---concept of showing interest on Facebook post or Page.

Following---Facebook feature enabling users to receive all updates on the Page being followed.

1.7 Conclusion

The current chapter introduced and contextualised the research in the introduction and background of study section, respectively. Research objectives were also outlined in the chapter. Research statement of the problem and significance of study were noted. The chapter was concluded by the definition of key terms. The subsequent discusses literature relevant to the research and the theory guiding the discussion.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter introduced the research. It also stated research objectives. Statement of the problem, significance of study and definition of key terms were given in the chapter. The current chapter constitutes the literature review and theoretical framework. Firstly, an appraisal of literature on social media use in general and use of social networking sites in Zimbabwe is done. This is subsequently followed by a discussion of the Public Sphere theory which informs the study.

2.2 Literature Review

The literature review is divided into two sections with an appraisal of literature on social media use in general at first. This is subsequently followed by the review of literature on the use of social networking sites in Zimbabwe. This enhances an understanding of the literature from a broader perspective to a specific one.

2.2.1 Social Media Use

According to Stepanova (2011) social media play two complimentary roles during political protests and these are organising and dispatching information about the protests. Stepanova (2011)'s view is hinged upon an analysis of the organisation and information dissemination role played by Facebook and Twitter during the Arab Spring of 2011 which contributed to the overthrow of the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes of the time. This view provides a rich insight into the importance of social media in coordinating and disseminating information about political protests. Stepanova (2011) focuses on the role played by social media in political protests. Nevertheless, the strength of social media should also be understood considering how this platform functions as a public sphere for rational debates despite its role in coordinating and spreading information on political protests. Understanding social media in the realm of political protests alone doesn't do justice to the phenomenon since it can also be utilised as a discussion forum enabling public deliberations on crucial matters. The current research hopes to contribute towards an understanding of social media in the realm of public sphere.

On the same note Arriagada and Scherman (2014) note that social media sites enable users to discuss political issues and help coordinate protests. The two scholars focus on the political use of social media during the 2011 Chilean student movement. Arriagada and Scherman (2014) assert that social media was utilized as a discussion platform for expression of students grievances and as an arena for coordinating the 2011 Chilean student protests. It is interesting to note that the duo bring forward another role of social media in protests which Stepanova (2011) didn't focus on: that of acting as a discussion platform. One greatly acknowledges the merit in this argument since it extends our understanding of yet another unique function social media play during protests. Despite the use of social media as a discussion site during political protests, social media's potential as a discussion forum can also be harnessed in understanding this function in relation to the notion of public sphere where citizens can deliberate on issues affecting their lives. Thus, the power of social media as an arena for public discussions cannot afford to be understood only in the context of political protests, rather it should be extended to an understanding of social media as an alternative public sphere. An understanding confined to political protests offers a narrower and limited perspective of social media's potential as a forum for public discussions.

Smuts (2010) asserts that social media, which is one prominent form of new media, acts as a public sphere where public deliberations occur during the process of facilitating public opinion. This suggests that social media gives room for the formation of public opinion. Through an analysis of how the ex-US President, Barack Obama, utilized Facebook in 2008 to influence public opinion, Smuts' perspective on the manipulation of social media in political campaigns is mainly interested in how social media influences public opinion. In as far as Smuts (2010) acknowledges the potential of social media as a public sphere, he carried out his study in the American context. Nevertheless, the current study seeks to examine how social media acts as a public sphere in the Zimbabwean context. This will broaden the world's understanding of social media's affordances as a public sphere in a different setting. This is influenced by the fact that America and Zimbabwe have got different social, economic and political backgrounds; hence

they might have differing social media experiences. Smuts used a case on Barack Obama's use of Facebook to influence public opinion in 2008. The current study is making use of a case on Bond notes examining how Facebook was manipulated for public debates concerning the introduction of Bond notes. Making use of a different case study has the potential to develop the notion of social media as a public sphere in varying scenarios.

According to Dube (2013) social media allows free exchange of views among members of the network societies since it is free from state control. Dube focuses on the emancipatory quality of social media based on an analysis of how the phenomenon has been used for free expression of views during the Arab Spring and how it has been used by spectral figures Baba naMai Jukwa in Zimbabwe during the 2013 elections (Dube, 2013). In as far as Dube (2013) acknowledges the fact that social media provides a conducive environment for unrestricted expression of views, Dube is silent on the understanding of social media as a public sphere. Therefore the research seeks to add an understanding of social media in relation to public sphere.

Coleman and Blumler (2009) argue that lack of democratic spaces for public deliberations justify citizens' wide use of social media for free expression of views. The duo's argument is premised on the liberating nature of social media in environments with limited democratic spaces for undertaking public deliberations. These scholars observe that continual developments and increase in internet access opened up new platforms with social media opening an alternative hub for citizen participation in public dialogue on political issues and other civic issues affecting the majority's daily lives. These scholars are basically worried about emphasizing the emancipatory nature of social media in terms of opinion expression therefore they do not specifically discuss social media as a public sphere. The current research seeks to address this deficit since the notion of democracy enabled by social media can also be understood in the realm of public sphere examining how this quality can qualify social media as a public sphere.

Burgess and Green (2009:77) argue that YouTube as a social media site is a “cultural public sphere because it is an enabler of encounters with cultural differences and the development of political listening across belief systems and identities.” This view of YouTube as a cultural public sphere is crucial in understanding social media as a public sphere in general. However, Burgess and Green (2009) paid close attention to YouTube as a public sphere. The current study seeks to examine the applicability of the notion of public sphere to Facebook which is also a social media site just like YouTube. One sees it fit to understand the notion of public sphere in terms of Facebook since, according to the World Internet Stats (2016), it is currently the world’s popular social media platform. In addition the study makes a departure from Burgess and Green’s understanding of online public sphere in terms of culture. Rather it pays close attention to how social media, with special reference to Facebook, acts as a public sphere for civic issues outside culture.

There are some scholars who wrote on social media use whose views are contrary to the notion that social media acts as a modern public sphere. According to Iosifidis (2011) social media does not facilitate effective public dialogue and critical deliberations since dialogue on platforms like Twitter are constrained by the limited number of characters allowed. Nevertheless, this argument is underpinned on an understanding of social media from a Twitter perspective. It is therefore crucial to have an understanding of social media as a public sphere basing on a different platform like Facebook since it operates at a different level from Twitter. Iosifidis (2011) asserts that virtual public spheres just give an impression that the public is included in the public discussions yet they are not fully engaged. According to critics such as Iosifidis (2011), online public spheres project an impression that the online community is fully incorporated in ongoing public debates yet they are not. This argument is hinged upon the scholar’s realisation of the manipulation of online public deliberations by prominent political actors who control the direction of public discourse. However, such arguments provide a justification for the current study since it seeks to have an examination of the extent to which social media as an online platform can function as a vibrant public sphere. One will be therefore left in a position suitable enough to comment on these debates concerning the notion of social media as a public sphere.

Coleman (1999) argues that online media undermines the idea of public sphere since online discussions are ineffective due to lack of physical interaction which facilitates meaningful discussions. According to Coleman (1999)'s standpoint online public deliberations are of poor quality because they are not grounded on rational ground due to the absence of face to face interaction which facilitate significant public debates. Coleman's view is anchored upon a research carried out before the 21st century. It is worthy considering that to date there are so many developments which happened in the realm of online communication platforms for instance developments in social media. Therefore there is need for examining how such developments facilitate meaningful online public deliberations.

2.2.2 Use of Social Networking Sites in Zimbabwe

Siziba and Ncube (2015) assert that in Zimbabwe social networking platforms like Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp are used to provide counter discourses to ideologies spread by state controlled media like the Herald newspaper. The duo emphasize the idea that these platforms act as mouthpieces for the subalterns in Zimbabwe where state media discourses and ideologies are controlled by the state. They make use of a case study on how social media platforms were utilized to ridicule state media hegemonic views concerning President Robert Mugabe. The president fell in public view at the airport upon his arrival from Ethiopia for the 2015 African Union meeting and the incident loomed across various social networking platforms. According to Siziba and Ncube (2015), satiric comments on the leader were spread across SNS platforms to oppose state media ideology which portray the President as an extraordinary long serving, energetic and youthful leader. Nevertheless, these scholars focused on how social networking platforms are used to provide counter discourses to state media ideologies in the country. The duo therefore pursue an understanding of SNS platforms in terms of how they are utilized to oppose hegemonic ideologies concerning the country's president. However, it is also crucial to understand the utilization of SNS platforms in the country in the realm of public sphere where Zimbabweans can engage in meaningful public discussions and rational debates on crucial issues.

Mutsvairo and Columbus (2012) hold the assertion that Zimbabweans use Facebook for information access. They dwell on the notion that it is difficult for the government of Zimbabwe to control the flow of information on social media. The pair argue that Zimbabwe's traditional media environment is heavily monitored therefore Facebook functions as an alternative channel to access information which is inaccessible via traditional media. This view is resourceful to our understanding of Facebook as an information tool in Zimbabwe. However there is need for academic research to go beyond such a view of Facebook as source of information, to an understanding of how Facebook acts as an arena for public discourse, thus examining how it functions as a public sphere where the public can assemble in the virtual sphere and share opinions on particular issues.

According to the Freedom House (2012:8) "In Zimbabwe sites like Facebook are used for chatting and keeping connected with friends, as well as staying abreast of global news." From this perspective in Zimbabwe, Facebook performs three tasks. It acts as a discussion platform, a social utility used for enhancing social connections as well as an information source for global news. This offers a general view of the roles of Facebook in Zimbabwe without shedding much light on the idea of how Facebook is used as a public forum for the conduction of public deliberations facilitating public opinion. The current research therefore hopes to broaden the understanding of Facebook in relation to how it functions as a public sphere for public debates on issues affecting Zimbabweans.

According to Lindquist (2013), in Zimbabwe Facebook and WhatsApp provide a safer hub for young people to freely express themselves in a digital environment without fear of reprimand, judgment and restriction. This argument is based on the usage of social media platforms by young people in the urban Zimbabwe. The scholar's findings provides an insight on the trend of social media usage among the youthful generation. Since this scholar confined himself to examining social media usage among youths, the current research hopes to develop this idea into an understanding of how Zimbabweans in general regardless of age utilize Facebook as a public arena where they can liberally share their views on matters affecting most citizens.

In the same vein Siziba and Ncube (2015:519) hold the notion that in Zimbabwe “Social media spaces such as Twitter have been important in creating alternative spaces for free discussion and exchange of information.” Just like in the case of Lindquist (2013) these scholars tend to suggest that social networking platforms allow citizenry free discussions in an unrestricted environment. Their argument is based on how such democratic spaces led to the destabilization of power grids in the country’s media. This study develops their idea in relation to how such democratic space afforded by SNSs in Zimbabwe can be understood in the context of a public sphere.

Dube (2013) argues that the Zimbabwean media has been considered suppressive and social media provided an alternative forum for public debates where opinions can be expressed liberally without fear of repercussions. This suggests that Zimbabweans utilise social media as a platform for carrying out public deliberations on matters of national interest where they can engage in free exchange of information and views. Dube (2013) offers a generalised view of how social media is used as a platform for liberal exchange of views. However, there is need for a shift from a generalised perspective to a more specific one, for instance how specific social media sites like Facebook enhance free public discussions in the context of public sphere.

Young (2016) acknowledges the use of social networking sites for organizing protests in Zimbabwe arguing that the country’s recent #ThisFlag protest has been characterized as a spontaneous social media movement. Pastor Evan Mawarire, founder of #ThisFlag, coordinated the 6 July 2016 stay away action through social networking sites specially Facebook and Twitter. Young (2016) focuses on the idea of social media as a platform for instigating social movements. The scholar sheds light on the relationship between social networking sites and protests in the country. However use of social networking sites in Zimbabwe can also be understood in the realm of public sphere, thus ascertaining how they are used as a platform for public deliberations. The current research hopes to enhance an understanding of how social networking sites especially Facebook opened up an arena for Zimbabwean public discourse.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

The previous section of the chapter reviewed the already existing literature on social media. This particular section discusses the Public Sphere theory which informs the study. The section gives

a brief background of the theory, outlines the theory's core assumptions and highlights the relevance of the theory to the current study. Its relevance is discussed in relation to other critics' contributions concerning the applicability of Habermas' ideas to digital public spheres.

2.3.1 Public Sphere Theory

The current study is informed by Jurgen Habermas' concept of the Public Sphere. It is often rare for one to discuss anything to do with the public sphere without mentioning Habermas' theory of the Public Sphere. Since this research examines Facebook as an alternative public sphere, the theory provides an entry point to an understanding on how Facebook is functioning as an alternative public sphere in the digital world.

According to Thompson (1990), it is during the late 17th and 18th centuries that the phenomenon called the bourgeois public sphere became more pronounced. Smuts (2010) acknowledges that the public sphere emerged owing to various societal changes that were evident in English bourgeois society after the Enlightenment period. The bourgeois society was industrially advanced and represented the welfare state. Habermas developed the public sphere concept where he offered a historical as well as a sociological analysis of the period after the Enlightenment era. According to Smuts (2010) the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere occurred subsequently to what Habermas (1989) refers to as "representative publicness" of the medieval era where decisions were made by the ruling nobility and merely presented before the populace. According to Thompson (1990) the bourgeoisie public sphere provided an arena where the government could be placed in a position to rationalise its decisions before the public. Habermas (1989:1-3) defines the public sphere as a

Conceptual space between the public, with its enclosed institutions and organisations, and the circle of the private life. In this space, private citizens came together to deliberate issues in an environment that was absent from influence of government, the economy and other relevant institutions and organisations.

To Habermas, public sphere is domain which is free from the influence of state authorities and state agents, an arena which provide citizens with a favourable environment to engage in discussions for a common cause. According to Boeder (2005), in Smuts (2010), it was an arena for political discourse where public debates facilitated public opinion. Habermas (1989) holds

the notion that the quality of a democratic state is determined by the citizens' ability to liberally express their views and opinions without fear of intimidation or torture. In a public sphere participants cease to be passive but shift to being active participants who can contribute in a debate towards a particular issue that concerns the general public through opinion sharing.

2.3.2 Core Assumptions

The core assumption of the Public Sphere theory is that public deliberations in the public sphere facilitates public opinion. Other assumptions are highly pronounced in Habermas' proposed three criteria which act as prerequisites for the existence of public sphere. These are *disregard of status*, *inclusivity* and *common concern*. According to Habermas an ideal public sphere should meet these three conditions.

The theory's core assumption rests on the idea that the primary function of a public sphere is to facilitate public opinion. Thompson (1990) asserts that through rational debate free from domination, the public air their individual opinions towards the formation of public opinion. This suggests that individual opinions evolve into public opinion towards a particular issue and public opinion is understood as the overall opinion held by the majority. Habermas (1989) argues that public sphere is best understood as a social domain where public opinions can be formed. The importance of a public sphere is realised on its ability to facilitate public opinion formation. Dahlgren (1995) understand public sphere as an arena where the public circulate knowledge in the society driving towards public opinion. This tends to suggest that in a public sphere participants are transformed from being inactive to proactive participants who can share their views during the public dialogue.

As highlighted, the theory's assumptions are clearly marked in Habermas' preconditions of the public sphere. On *disregard of status* Habermas (1989) holds the notion that access to the public sphere is definite to all citizens. This suggests that participation in the public sphere has nothing to do with participants' social class therefore it is a public domain accessible to all citizens. Thus, the sphere has no "head" or "subordinate" rather the participants are equal and can freely and equally express their views. Habermas argues that the sphere is a public domain which

disregard participants' social class; hence every participant's argument is given attention. According to Thompson, (1990) the domain was based on "publicness."

Furthermore, the theory assumes that public deliberations in a public sphere should be based on matters of *common interest*. Smuts (2010) argues that public discussions should be limited to debates concerning matters of national interest. Those issues that affect the majority are the ones welcomed in public discussions and the public debates will be driven towards a common cause. Hence private issues are not entertained.

The assumption on *inclusivity* is very much related to that of *disregard of status*. According to Habermas (1989) public sphere has an open door policy disallowing any form of social exclusion, thus anyone is allowed to participate and contribute to public discourse. Smuts (2010) argues that it was almost impossible for the participating public to fully close its doors in a bid to disallow participation. The sphere is a social public domain, with its doors open to all the citizens.

2.3.3 Relevance to study

Although the concept of public sphere was initially based on explaining the bourgeois society of the late 17th and 18th centuries of Great Britain, France and Germany, it can also be applied to different contexts. In this digital era it can still be applied towards the understanding of how the advent of Internet based interactive platforms has provided for new public spheres. The study is however interested in understanding how social media, with special attention to Facebook, has provided an alternative public sphere in the digital form. The theory is therefore relevant to this study which examines the extent to which Facebook conforms to Habermas' ideal of public sphere.

Critics like Fraser (2007) develop the concept of the public sphere arguing that in this digital era there developed a transnational public sphere which transcends local and national boundaries. According to Fraser (2007), the public sphere theory is a rich conceptual resource worthy of reconstruction, instead of dismissal, in order to suit the obtaining situation in the Information Society. Considering this view, the notion of public sphere should not be continually viewed

within the confines of local or national boundaries as was in the case of the traditional bourgeoisie public sphere. Instead, Fraser (2007) argues for the existence of a globalised public sphere due to the advent of information communication technologies, witnessing therefore the participation of global participants on the same digital sphere. On the same note Smuts (2010:39) is of the contention that “Since Habermas, there have been many societal changes that influenced the notion of the public sphere. Amongst the advances, the most prominent and dynamic were in the media.” The traditional public sphere has therefore been viewed within the confines of the bourgeoisie society. Nevertheless, information communication technologies have led to a global public sphere allowing participation from global participants. Fraser and Smuts offer a generalised view of how information communication technologies revolutionised the concept of public sphere without necessarily discussing social media specifically. It is upon such an argument that the current research seeks to understand the public sphere in the context of social media which is a prominent offshoot of information communication technologies.

Fuchs (2014) nevertheless argues that freedom of association and assembly on social media are compromised since capitalists and renowned political actors exercise a considerable amount of authority, showing traces of domination in speech, association, assembly and opinion. Such a view advances the notion that public spheres realized on social media platforms do not offer equal freedom to participation as highly glorified since political gurus and capitalists in the society can grab the opportunity and utilize the online sphere to their advantage especially in influencing public opinion. In accordance with Fuchs (2014)’s view, this kind of situation therefore betrays the quality of a public sphere, *disregard of status* in particular, since well-known political figures can utilize their advantageous political positions to influence the direction and flow of public discourse. However, Fuchs (2014)’s argument is highly related to Twitter where there is high prevalence of opinion leaders who seem to influence their followers and even set parameters on the discussion of particular topics. Still on Twitter, Fuchs (2007) questions the viability of critical rational debates given the limited number of characters per tweet (140 characters per tweet). These arguments are however hinged on Twitter and the current research examines a different platform, Facebook, to ascertain if such backdrops limit Facebook as a public sphere.

Critics like Murdock (2004) believe that Habermas' notion of *inclusivity* is difficult to realise on digital public spheres, hence the proposition is inconsistent with the notion of digital divide. For Murdock (2004), internet access is stratified by economic, social, political and religious factors like age, income, level of education, etc. According to such critics, not all interested individuals have the capacity to participate in online public deliberations. Murdock (2004) and colleagues suggest that online media access is not even across all members of the society. Individual's level of proficiency in making use of Facebook can also determine one's ability to participate in online public discourse. This can be exemplified by the fact that someone can have access to Facebook but might lack technical skills of uploading content which contributes to online public debate. Due to such factors, some individuals face social exclusion in online public deliberations. According to some critics, Habermas' criterion on inclusivity is therefore compromised since other individuals cannot share their views in the cyberspace.

Santos and Ndlovu (2015) use an oxymoron "democratic unfreedom" in their explanation of some issues which can hinder individual participation in public discourse on Facebook. They argue that Facebook does not allow total freedom of expression as highly celebrated. Societal institutions like family, education and religion "police" individual speech on Facebook, for instance the individual position in the family determines one's contributions in public discourse. The duo assert that in the case of religion those who hold prominent positions in the church have got expected speech patterns which might influence their conversational contributions on Facebook. According to Santos and Ndlovu (2015), in some instances individuals do not express their true views due to their societal obligations. These societal forces therefore limit one's liberal expression of views. Nevertheless, one can argue that Santos and Ndlovu's argument is far-fetched when it comes to individual participation in public discourse since the societal forces' impact on one's expression of views is difficult to measure. Instead the vibrancy of the online public sphere can be best understood through observation of the online public discourse.

2.4 Conclusion

The chapter reviewed existing literature on social media use in general and use of social networking sites in Zimbabwe. Appraisal of the literature was done in relation to the notion of social media as an alternative public sphere. Scholars' pre-occupations in their arguments have been discussed as well as gaps in as far as the concept of social media and public sphere is concerned.

The chapter also provided a brief background of the Public Sphere Theory and outlined its core assumptions. Relevance of the theory to the current study was elucidated in light of its critics. Despite scholarly criticism on the relevance of Habermas' suppositions on digital spheres, the theory is highly applicable in the current study since it offers a clear picture of how the concept of the public sphere came into being and set the criteria which act as preconditions for the existence of a public sphere. It is against such criticism that the current research attempts to examine the extent to which Facebook can function as a public sphere. The next chapter outlines the approach and data collection methods used in the research.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter comprised the literature review and theoretical framework. The current chapter of the study outlines the approach and data collection methods employed in accomplishing the research. The researcher adopted a qualitative approach and used qualitative data collection methods. The methods used are case study, participant observation and purposive sampling. The study examines a social phenomenon. This serves as a justification for the researcher's adoption of qualitative approach and methods to the research.

3.2 Qualitative Approach

To accomplish the current study, the researcher employed a qualitative approach. Hancock et al (2009:4) hold the notion that "Researchers interested in studying human behaviour and the social world inhabited by human beings, found increasing difficulty in trying to explain human behaviour in quantifiable and measurable terms." This suggests that qualitative approach is highly suitable for carrying out studies aimed at giving explanations or interpretations of human behaviour and understanding the world's social aspects. Social media is a social phenomenon therefore one could explore how Facebook acted as a public sphere for public discussions on Bond notes through qualitative methods. Research data is therefore presented in a qualitative descriptive form.

Hancock et al (2009:4) asserts that "Qualitative research attempts to broaden and/or deepen our understanding of how things came to be the way they are in our social world." Qualitative research seeks to expand and widen the world's understanding of certain phenomena thus seeking to add knowledge about a concept or issue. On the same note the current research hopes to widen understanding on how social media, especially SNSs, have provided an alternative arena in the digital form, where public discussions on crucial matters can take place. Social media is a modern-day phenomenon; therefore the study attempts to provide insights on how social media platforms serve as an alternative public sphere. This serves as a justification for one's choice of a qualitative approach since it is explorative in nature.

However, Mack et al (2005) argue that qualitative approach is associated with researcher subjectivity as compared to quantitative approach which is objective. This is because the approach is based on the researcher's own interpretation of data which in some cases might be subject to researcher bias. Therefore, unlike quantitative research approach which is deemed objective, qualitative approach is highly associated with the researcher's prejudice and bias during data description and interpretation. To avoid bias in data analysis, the researcher interpreted data basing on the actual observations made on Facebook. Thus, the researcher stuck to what the observations showed.

3.3 Research Design

3.3.1 Case Study

Due to the contemporaneity of social media, the researcher made use of a case study research design. This is also because social media itself is a broad phenomenon comprising various platforms. In a bid to understand social media as an alternative public sphere, it was difficult to explore the phenomenon in its entirety. The researcher made use of Facebook as a case study in understanding social media as a public sphere. Burnett (2009) postulates that case study gives room for an investigation of a single case. This suggests that case studies attempt to reveal the distinctive features of a character or situation and gives room for the researcher to conduct a thorough and profound analysis of that case or unit. The researcher carried out a detailed analysis of how Facebook accommodated public discussions on Bond notes in Zimbabwe in 2016. Due to the limited time of research it was difficult to explore all Facebook applications and features and examine how they facilitated public discourse on Bond notes. Therefore, emphasis was on how the public utilized *The Herald Facebook Page* as a public forum to air their views on Bond notes. Yin (1984) is of the assertion that a case study approach stresses on a thorough contextual examination of a limited number of events or conditions.

Like any other research method, case study as a research design has got its limitations. Bell (2007) argues that it is challenging to know what to include and exclude in a case. It is challenging for the researcher to set parameters on where to start and where to end. Researchers who adopt case studies are often confronted with the challenge of not knowing what to incorporate and what to omit during the research process. Therefore, researchers need to be

extremely cautious in surfing the elements to include for convincing and comprehensible results. To overcome this limitation the research focused on *The Herald Facebook Page* public discussions on Bond notes which took place in the month of November 2016 since it is in this month that the Bond notes were introduced for public use.

In addition, Mack (2005) argues that case study is associated with subjectivity which has to do with the nature of qualitative research itself. The researcher may be biased in the process of data analysis. On the same note Yin (2004) is of the assertion that a case study tolerates subjective views to affect the course of research findings and conclusions. This suggests that the use of a case study gives room for partiality of which the probability of preconceived notions and foregone conclusions will be there. To minimise this limitation, the researcher avoided manipulating observations made on *The Herald Facebook Page*.

3.3.2 Participant Observation

The researcher collected data through participant observation. Kawulich (2005) holds the assertion that participant observation is appropriate in researches where there is information gap in literature on the phenomenon. This implies that participant observation is one of those methods which can be employed in investigating a current phenomenon where very little is known on the subject. There is still information gap on the notion of social media as an alternative public sphere. Through participant observation, the researcher examined how *The Herald Facebook Page* attracted public deliberations and debates on the issue of Bond notes. This could not be achieved through carrying out interviews and distributing questionnaires. Participant observation was ideal since the researcher is also part of the Facebook world. The researcher followed *The Herald Facebook Page* to make observations and examined public discourses on Bond notes from an insider's perspective. Jorgensen (1989:12) argues that "Participant observation is especially appropriate for scholarly problems when little is known about the phenomenon." This highlights the strength of this method in gaining insights on a contemporary phenomenon.

Schensul, and Lecompte (1999) shed light on the merits of using participant observation, arguing that it enables the researcher to be aware of how and why human beings behave in the manner they do in a setting through exposure. Thus, participant observation is associated with gaining knowledge through the researcher's exposure to the ongoing activities of the research setting. On the same note, the researcher observed how *The Herald Facebook Page* invited those who liked and followed the page to participate in public dialogue, sharing their diversified views on Bond notes. The researcher became part and parcel of such a public through "liking" and "following" the page.

Nevertheless, Bernard (2006) highlights the limitation of participant observation, arguing that it is also associated with researcher subjectivity. Researcher subjectivity betrays one quality of research which is that of being objective. Researcher bias may be found in the interpretation stage where one can make assumptions and judgements based on one's own thoughts and background instead of what is actually transpiring on the ground. This in turn will lead to biased and partial notions and conclusions which can invite heavy scholarly criticism. Nevertheless, this limitation is minimised in the current research since the researcher examined Facebook as a public sphere through the lenses of the Public Sphere Theory.

Spradley (1980) holds the assertion that participant observation is time-consuming as it calls for a long period for the researcher to carry out sufficient observations in exchange for convincing results. This suggest that the method requires a lot of time and commitment. However, in the current research observations were made in cyberspace by simply observing users' comments on *The Herald Facebook Page* posts; hence this shortcoming ceased to be a stumbling block in this study. Due to limited time and the need to keep the research manageable, observations were confined to public deliberations which occurred in the month of November.

3.3.3 Purposive Sampling

The researcher also employed purposive sampling. Facebook is a broad social networking site with a myriad of features and applications which in general enable the public to engage in public discussions on the platform. Issues and stories on Bond notes were posted on various platforms like pages, groups, events and news feed on Facebook. Due to limited time of the research it was

impossible to explore all these features and applications. The researcher focused on how *The Herald Facebook Page* accommodated public discourse on Bond notes. The researcher purposefully selected this page which set an agenda on Bond notes and ensured that public discussions did not emerge from a vacuum. It was also impossible to select all Herald posts on Bond notes. Five (5) posts on Bond notes posted on *The Herald Facebook Page* in the month of November 2016 were selected. Fifty comments were observed from each post. The selected time frame was ideal since it was the month Bond notes were placed on the market.

The researcher opted for purposive sampling instead of probability sampling since the latter is associated with the purpose of generalising findings and the former is mainly suitable in qualitative research which seeks a deeper understanding of a phenomenon. Patton (1990:169) notes that “Samples for qualitative inquiry are generally assumed to be selected purposefully to yield cases that are information rich.” This suggests that through purposive sampling, researchers can produce cases which are resourceful as they will be concentrating on a sample they believe enhance the world’s understanding of that phenomenon.

Even though purposive sampling method is widely used in qualitative research, it has got some drawbacks. Oppong (2013) holds the view that purposive sampling is problematic as the researcher faces challenges in identifying and applying an appropriate sample. This suggests that purposeful sampling is an effective yet challenging method to implement. To minimize this challenge, the researcher selected those posts which attracted greater public attention on the Page.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter shed light on the approaches adopted and the data collection methods used in the research. It also offered justifications on the researcher’s selection of a qualitative approach over a quantitative one. In addition, the strengths and weaknesses of case study, participant observation and purposeful sampling have been elucidated. The next chapter focuses on data presentation and analysis.

CHAPTER FOUR: DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter shed light on the methods used for data collection. It also discussed the strengths and weaknesses of each method. This chapter focuses on data presentation and analysis. It is divided into three sections with data presentation and discussion on how the Facebook Page application facilitates public discussions at first. This is subsequently followed by the discussion of Facebook dialogue on Bond notes. Limitations of Facebook as an alternative public sphere are discussed at last.

4.2 Facilitation of public discussions by the Facebook Page application

The current section discusses findings on how the Facebook Page application enables public discussions for the Facebook online community. It is observed that people do not only use Facebook for enhancing social interactions but also utilize the platform for expressing their views on issues affecting the majority especially those to do with government policies and actions. In this digital world where technology has revolutionized traditional communication practices, the existence of physical arenas for public discourse to take place is no longer a requirement since this can be done on Facebook where people from various points virtually assemble and engage in online public discussions of crucial matters. Thus, Facebook functions as a vibrant public sphere enabling rational public debates to take place.

Most previous research on Facebook as a site of public discourse focused on the Group application. However, the current research observes that the Page application equally plays a critical function in enabling public discussions. In examining the Page application's ability to facilitate public discourse, the researcher observed how *The Herald Facebook Page* facilitated public discussions on the issue of Bond notes. The Page provided a favorable setting for Zimbabwean citizens, including those in diaspora, to express their diversified opinions on the issue of Bond notes. Facebook Page application is therefore a systematically structured platform with several features which makes it a conducive arena for public discourse to take place. This qualifies Facebook in general as a social media platform which functions as a fruitful online public sphere since research have shown that it is wired with yet another application (Page application) that promotes dialogic communication to take place between participants.

It's very rare for an individual to be part of the Facebook "family" without following one or so Pages. Facebook Page is an application which allows the virtual existence of organizations, products, institutions, associations, public figures, companies, artists, etc. Facebook Page application opens an alternative platform upon which the public can deliberate their views on matters of common interests. It does not cost anything to create a Page. Rather it is free for all, with one simply having to follow steps as directed on Facebook. The one who creates the page is referred to as the administrator. The administrator is the one who runs and controls the Page in terms of providing details of the given entity for instance organizational details and uploading content. Facebook users who "like" and "follow" that Page are called *supporters*, who can view and upload content on the platform. However, Page content is also readily available for non-followers who can also comment on the posts. For a Page to be considered authentic it should be verified by Facebook administrators operating from the central server and the verification information is displayed on the Page. The Page displays the entity's profile, displaying the name, cover photo and mostly organizational icon for easy identification. Additional information is found on the *About* feature detailing what the organization is about. It contains such details as contact details, vision, motto, achievements and any other relevant information which facilitates the public's familiarization with that entity.

The supporters' ability to both view and upload information on the Page already leave participants in a position of being content originators and consumers simultaneously, thus the alternation of communication roles promotes dynamic flow of communication enabling public dialogue to take place on the platform. The Page's licensing of participants as both senders and receivers of information acts as the primary factor which allows the exchange of views between the participants. This is because dialogue can only prevail in an environment that promotes bidirectional flow of information. Public discussions on Facebook Pages are therefore enabled by the application's ability to promote dynamic communication between participants. Dialogic communication on the Page occurs at two levels: between the administrator and participants and interlocution among participants themselves thereby giving all parties a chance to express their views on a particular issue. On the Page one way flow of information is circumvented and this qualifies Facebook as an alternative digital public sphere promoting public discussions.

A Facebook Page accommodates thousands of people who engage in online public dialogue. *The Herald Facebook Page* profile shows that the Page has 211, 469 likes and 211, 075 as of 23 August 2017. However, the number of likes and followers on the page are in continuous increase. This highlights the extent to which Facebook Pages virtually bring together people of the same interests who, on matters concerning the general populace, can engage in conversations. Figure 1 below shows the number of *Herald Facebook Page* likes and followers as of 23 August 2017.



Figure 1: Herald Facebook Page number of Likes and Followers as of 23/3/2017

The figure above shows the extent to which the Page application virtually assembles people from various walks of life, with diversified views on common topics. Nevertheless, not all Page followers partake in the ongoing discussions on the platform. From the 5 posts observed in the study, the number of comments do not tally with the total number of followers, suggesting that only a reasonable number of participants can engage themselves in the ongoing debates. This however does not undermine the fact that Pages enable public discussions.

Public discussions on *The Herald Facebook Page* were enabled through the comment feature which serves as a vital cog for the facilitation of public discourse on the platform. Below every

post there exists *Like, Comment and Share* options. Of these three options, the widely utilized feature is the comment section which is due to the fact that it allows the user to express his/her views concerning the issue. The comment feature therefore provides an opportunity for participants to exchange views on crucial matters. The column allows one to type very long texts which provide an ample chance for the participants to express their views and opinions without limitations in terms of text length. This qualifies the Facebook Page application as a virtual platform enabling effective and vibrant public discussions. Figure 2 below shows an example of rational debate that took place when the participants were commenting on the administrator's post publicizing the RBZ's intention to introduce Bond notes in the country. The public utilized the comment section to express their various opinions concerning the initiative. Participants' various interpretations of the government's move were relayed via comments without hesitation.



Figure 2: Example of rational debate

By evaluating the nature of comments above, one can note that public discussions on Bond notes were informed by rational thinking. This justifies the notion that Facebook Pages enable public

debates to take place. This qualifies Facebook as an alternative public sphere facilitating reasonable online public discussions.

Public discourse on the Page is also enabled by flexibility in the length of a text allowed in the comment section such that long comments can be realized on the platform. From the size of conversations in the extract above, one notes that participants freely expressed their opinions without restriction in terms of length unlike in the case of Twitter which allows 140 characters per tweet. The findings challenge the over-generalized notions from some scholars who dismiss the effectiveness of public discussions on social media arguing that public discourse on such platforms is undermined by confinements in the size of texts allowed. The Facebook Page enables participants to comprehensively express their opinions through comments. Through comments, Zimbabweans on *The Herald Facebook Page* were able to air their views on the issue of Bond notes.

On the Page, each comment is in anticipation of responses from other interlocutors and this is realized in the existence of the *Reply* option below each comment. It means that one participant's view has the potential to invite other's opinions. The fact that participants can pay attention and respond to each other's comments highlights that public dialogue exists on the platform. Rational debates took place on *The Herald Facebook Page* since participants paid attention to others' comments and expressed their views in response thereby engaging in a public discussion. The rejoinders facilitates vibrant public debates on the Page. This can be the same with what happens among the physically gathered participants where interlocutors respond to each other. This can be exemplified by the extract below showing a comment which received 15 replies.



Figure 3: Example of a comment with replies

From the above scenario where a comment received 15 replies, one can note that meaningful public dialogue took place since the participants are placed in a position where they can respond to each other's contributions on the platform. On a Page, communication is bidirectional, allowing users to exchange views in a meaningful way. However, some participants are a bit reserved in terms of explicitly expressing their replies. Some indirectly express their standpoints through liking others' comments. If one "likes" a comment that is a strong communication signaling the fact that the individual concurs with that view. The same assumes a different form in public discussions conducted in the physical spaces where if one agrees with the contributor's opinion, one can clap hands to show that they agree with that view without necessarily making a verbal confirmation. Nevertheless, this form of commenting on the Page might be a result of tight schedules on the part of an individual who might not be able to engage in typing a text. Nevertheless, the question of "liking" a comment is debatable since one may accidentally hit the "like" button and some might "like" acknowledging that they have read or seen the comment.

Clarity promotes meaningful public discussions on the Page and this is enabled by the fact that comments can be edited which enhance clearness in opinion expression. This provides users with the opportunity to clear ambiguities and errors which would have occurred in the first version of the comment. This is similar to what happens in public discussions in a physical arena where if an

interlocutor makes a mistake he or she can make amendments. This can also be done on Facebook comments where one is provided with the chance to edit the comment mainly to make corrections especially on spelling and in cases where they feel they have communicated in an incomprehensible way. The edited versions of the comment is open to other participants. Such an option reduces the possibility of ambiguity in one's argument which again facilitates smooth flow of discussions. Below is an extract showing the option for editing a comment.

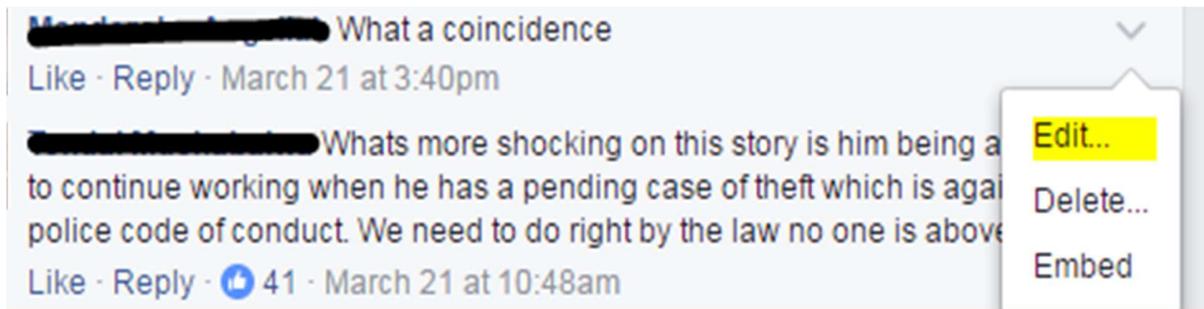


Figure 4: Option for editing a comment

Furthermore, it has come to the researcher's knowledge that public discussions on Facebook Page are enabled by the fact that supporters can ignite an alternative discussion through posting content which can attract public deliberations. They are also able to participate in the already established discussions through commenting. This justifies the dynamic flow of communication which takes place on the Page where there are no perpetual originators and constant consumers of information. This dynamicity in information flow highlights the extent to which the Facebook Page application facilitates public discussions since dialogue cannot be realized in a setting where there is vertical flow of information. There exists a section on the page which gives room for supporters to upload information on the page as shown in Figure 5.

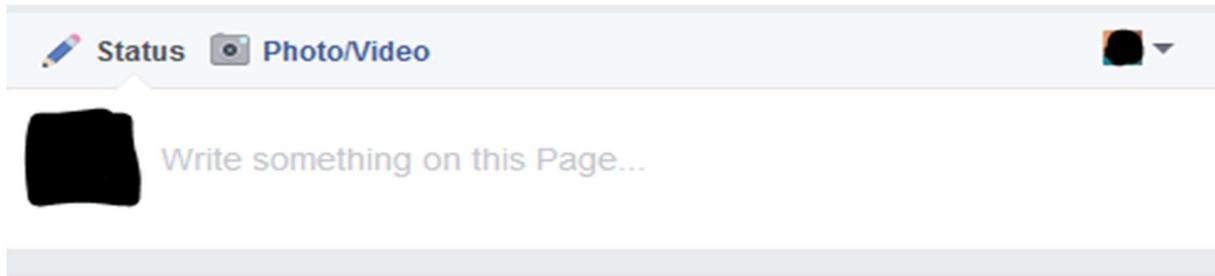


Figure 5: Option facilitating supporters' ability to upload information on the Page

Nevertheless, participants on the Page do not pay much attention to posts uploaded by individuals. It was observed that Page followers are mainly interested in engaging in a public dialogue following posts from the Page administrator. This can be exemplified by the fact that on *The Herald Facebook Page* the administrator's post on Bond notes could receive about two hundred comments, compared to posts by other individuals which could receive as low as three comments. Although individuals are empowered to upload content, their posts do not yield influence which can ignite meaningful discussions. The Page administrator's posts are perhaps regarded as authentic and serious hence the upper hand in terms of agenda setting. Individual's power to initiate an alternative discussion is therefore limited on the Page platform. Below is an extract of an individual post which received three comments only.



Figure 6: Individual post with 3 comments

Although participants are equipped with the option of *sharing* a post, the culture of *sharing* or forwarding posts on Bond notes was not common on *The Herald Facebook Page*. Participants were mainly interested in expressing their diversified views on the matter. This can be exemplified by Figure 7 below highlighting a post on *The Herald Facebook Page* which received 15 shares only. This is quite a conservative number compared to the number of followers and likes on the Page as well as the nearly two hundred comments generated on the post. The number of shares therefore is not proportional to the number of participants on the Page. The concept of sharing is not widely utilised on *The Herald Facebook Page*. This is quite unfortunate since the Page is run by a media company which uploads most articles published in its nationwide, print newspaper. Because *The Herald* is national, one would expect that the news it publishes would motivate interest in sharing. The issue of Bond notes was nevertheless a sensitive and emotional issue where, possibly, users would not prioritise mere sharing over expressing their views.



Figure 7: Example of a post that received 15 shares

Considering the above discussion, it may be concluded that the Page application on Facebook plays a significant role in enabling public discussions on critical matters affecting the majority. As deliberated earlier, this is because the application is fashioned with numerous features which make it a conducive hub for online public debates. These features enable dialogic communication to take place among the participants on the platform. The ability of the Page application in enabling public dialogue therefore qualifies Facebook, in general, as a vibrant

online public sphere where the online community can deliberate their views on critical matters. The following section discusses Facebook dialogue on Bond notes.

4.3 Facebook dialogue on Bond notes.

In the previous section, the researcher discussed how the Facebook Page application facilitates public discussions. The current section discusses how conversations about Bond notes on *The Herald Facebook Page* qualify or disqualify Facebook as a public sphere. Key to this discussion are factors such as dialogue, freedom of expression, rationality, equal participation and the presence of a heterogeneous group.

From the flow of discussions among participants on *The Herald Facebook Page*, the researcher observed that Facebook functions as a digital public sphere which enables dialogue among participants. Participants exchanged views expressing their concerns on Bond notes on Facebook. Dialogue among participants is one of the major defining aspects of public sphere where members of the public will be sharing views towards an issue affecting most citizens. Introduction of Bond notes was one of the burning issues which characterized *The Herald Facebook Page* and Facebook discourse in general. The issue attracted public attention leading to participation in public dialogue on the platform, following various posts by *The Herald*. Participants could respond to each other either in agreement or disagreement. As discussed in the previous section, effective dialogue is realized through participants' utilization of the *Reply* option giving participants a chance to respond directly to other's views. From the five posts observed, the way participants commented on the issue of Bond notes proved that Facebook has opened an alternative arena for public dialogue in the cyberspace. Below is an extract of comments where participants engaged in a dialogue through responding to each other's comments concerning bond notes.

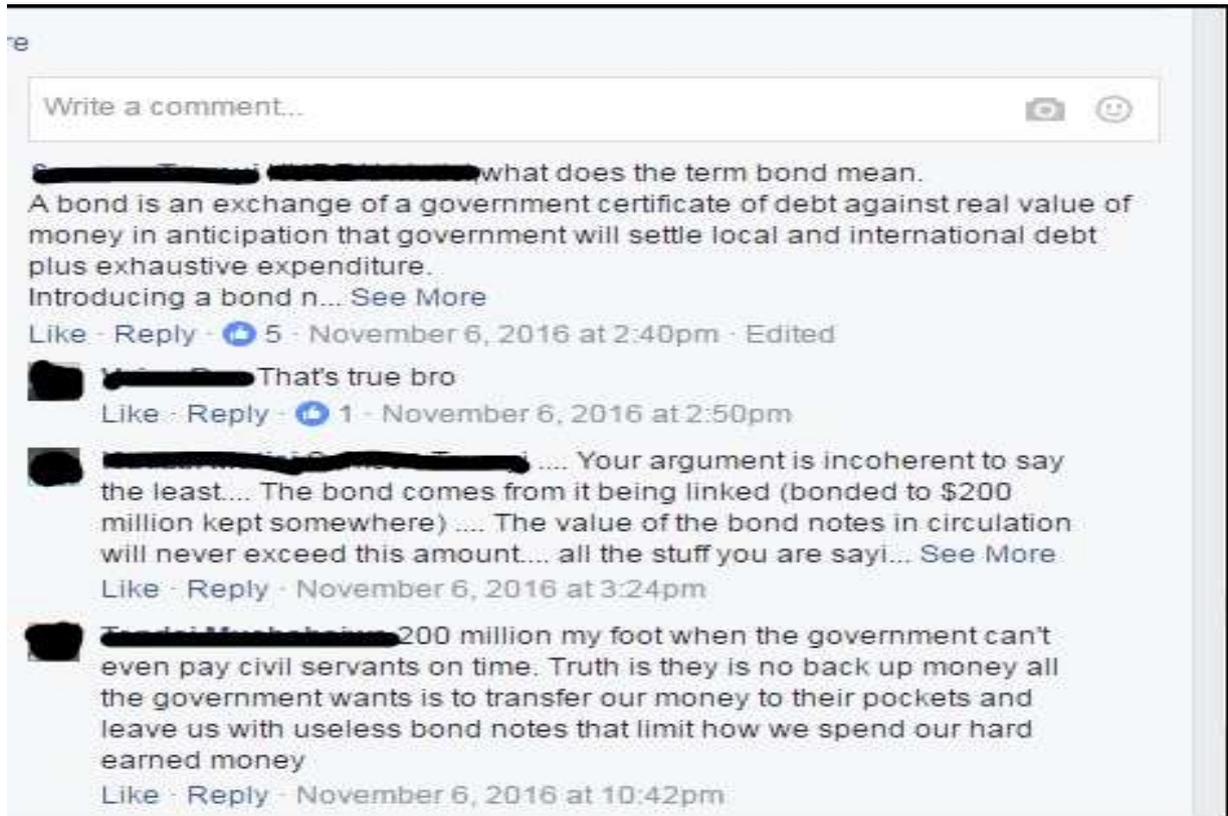


Figure 8: Dialogue between participants

From the above, it is observed that dialogue was taking place with participants exchanging ideas concerning Bond notes. Individual participants shared individual opinions on what the term “bond” means. The researcher observed that public discussions on *The Herald Facebook Page* were guided by the principle of rationality. In defining public sphere, Habermas highlights that public discourse in the public sphere should be guided by logicity. Rationality is therefore realized on Facebook public discussions as observed in arguments raised on *The Herald Facebook Page* concerning Bond notes.

Opponents of Bond notes logically argued that introducing Bond notes will get the country’s economy back to the 2008 hyper-inflation perpetrated by Bearer cheques since the two currencies are of the same nature. This highlights that those participants did not just argue

against Bond notes for the sake of it, but employed common sense in their arguments. Logical reasoning is realized in the participants' reference to the 2008 era showing that participants do not express baseless arguments but contribute to the debate with sound justifications for their standpoints. Fear of the return of 2008 Bearer cheques through the back door is one of the major concerns raised by participants on the Page and it is evident in most of the comments on the five posts observed. To them the term "bond" is a modified name still referring to Bearer cheques. This shows the extent to which Facebook provides an alternative hub for commonsensical public debates just like what happens in public debates held in a physical setting. Below is an extract of logical arguments raised against Bond notes.

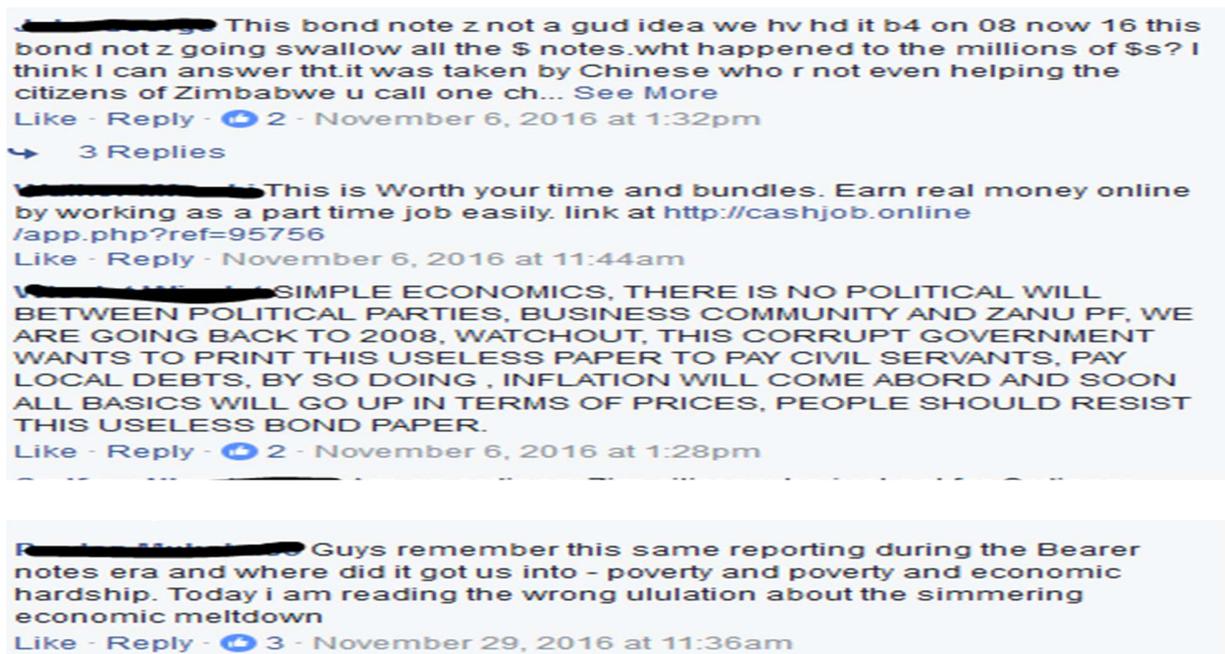


Figure 9: Rational debate, opponents of bond notes justifying their stance

In addition, the notion of Facebook as an alternative public sphere has been realized in the fact that the platform allows free expression of views. The researcher observed that participants on *The Herald Facebook Page* liberally expressed their concerns on the issue of Bond notes. Even the kind of language which the participants employed in their comments is a testimony to the extent of freedom attained on Facebook. That kind of expression would be difficult in public

discussions held in a physical arena in Zimbabwe. From Habermas' view, public sphere denotes a space for public deliberations free from state interference. One observed that it is challenging for governments to clip individual freedom of expression on Facebook. Thus, with the limited freedom of expression in the country, the researcher observed that Facebook opened an alternative channel which allows citizenry free expression of views which therefore qualify Facebook as an alternative public sphere. Most participants on the Page freely expressed their concern that Bond notes are not real currency and hence are not welcome. This was done in a language laden with emotional confidence. This is exemplified by the extracts of comments below which highlights that participants freely expressed their views.



Figure 10: Comment that highlighting participant's free expression of views.

Furthermore, the researcher observed that on *The Herald Facebook Page* participants had equal opportunity of participation in expressing their views on the posts. This qualifies Facebook as an

alternative public sphere since public sphere is understood as a space where the public can equally express their views regardless of social status. It is observed that any participant who wished to contribute in the ongoing public discussions would do so without exclusion. This means that Facebook promotes equal distribution of conversation power among participants. This is because there are no powerful individuals on the platform to include or exclude others from participating in the ongoing discussions. Thus, public dialogue on Facebook is founded upon an even ground which adheres to Habermas' prerequisite of *disregard of status* in a public sphere. This finding challenges some scholars' overgeneralized views that the idea of social media as a public sphere is undermined by the presence of public figures who control discussions on the platforms. Such a view is therefore inapplicable to Facebook since on *The Herald Facebook Page* all participants had equal opportunity to share views without others controlling the discussions. On a platform such as Twitter, discussions can be "controlled" by those prominent individuals followed by others, with the former having the potential to influence public opinion and direct the flow of public discussions. On a Facebook Page, nothing signals some individual's power in discussions. Thus, participants are on the same level by virtue of being followers of the same page.

The researcher observed that Facebook Pages and Facebook in general is open to all. This is because it can be accessed by anyone with the ability to. By ability the researcher refers to one's capacity to have a gadget and mobile data to access Facebook. The researcher found out that once one is a Facebook user, one will be in position to participate in the Facebook public discussions. This has been realized since both followers and non-followers had the capacity to partake in *The Herald Facebook Page* public discussions on Bond notes. The Page is open to all Facebook users who are willing to view it. This quality adheres to Habermas' notion of *inclusivity* where he argues that access to the public sphere is guaranteed to all citizens. Facebook is a public sphere in the cyberspace which therefore cannot afford to "shut its doors" on some individuals. Individuals who are not caught in the digital divide have the potential to partake in public discourses on the platform. Once one is part of the Facebook "community", there is no form of social exclusion which might deter them from joining the public discussions on matters of common concern.

The researcher also observed that a vibrant public sphere constitutes diverse groups of categorical participants: members who belong to either proponents, neutrals or opponents of a view. Habermas and previous scholars did not realize this quality of a public sphere. Instead they just focused on the existence of public debates in the public sphere without explicitly noting that there exists a heterogeneous group of individuals in the debates. It is crucial to recognize that effectiveness of public debate is enhanced by the presence of at least two groups of participants sharing contrary views towards a particular issue.

It is observed that on *The Herald Facebook Page* there exists mainly two groups of participants holding conflicting views towards Bond notes, that is, optimists and pessimists. Optimists are those participants who applauded the introduction of Bond notes as a good move capable of solving the economic challenges currently hitting the country. In contrast, pessimists held negative sentiments towards Bond notes, raising various arguments against the initiative. Their comments express uneasiness, doubt and anxiety towards Bond notes. The virtual public sphere should also be understood in terms of how the arena accommodates people with different views towards an issue in the public interest. This is also evident in public sphere realized in the physical setting where members will be holding clashing views towards the same issue. Below is an extract of pessimistic views about Bond notes expressed on the Page.



Figure: 11 Pessimistic views

From the comments, it is observed that, for pessimists, Bond notes will lead to *Demand Pull Inflation*, a situation where there will be very few goods in the market as a result of disappearance of goods from legitimate shops. Their argument is premised on the idea that Bond notes are only used within Zimbabwe and cannot be used for transactions beyond the borders which means a decline in the importation of basic commodities. This will in turn lead to the emergence of a “black market” where goods will be sold at exorbitant prices spelling out citizenry economic burden. Below is an extract of optimistic views on Bond notes.



Figure: 12 Optimistic views

As observed in the comments above, optimists applaud the government’s move of introducing Bond notes which they argue work for the betterment of the country’s economy. They argue that opposition parties in the country are responsible for the denunciation of Bond notes in a bid to decampaign the incumbent ruling party ZANU-PF. In addition, they also argued that those individuals who denigrate Bond notes are traitors wishing to witness the country suffer and disturb patriots’ hopes in Bond notes. Nevertheless, negative and positive views co-existed largely in comments following latter posts “Nation embraces Bond notes” and “Editorial Comment: Bond notes: Lets all play our roles” which appeared after Bond notes were already on

the market. Probably positive comments became more pronounced because the Bond notes initiative has been successfully implemented despite massive criticism. This is because more optimistic comments mushroomed on posts after Bond notes were already circulating in the country.

Considering the above discussion, it may be concluded that *The Herald Facebook Page* provided a favourable environment for the participants' free expression on Bond notes. Public discussions on the Page transpired in the same manner as those which take place in a physical arena since the environment promotes dialogue, free expression of views, realisation of rational public debates and promotes the existence of two groups holding contrary views towards Bond notes. This qualifies Facebook in general as an alternative public sphere which opened a hub for public discussions. Notable limitations of Facebook as a public sphere are discussed in the following section.

4.4 Limitations of Facebook as a public sphere

The previous section focused on how Facebook functions as a public sphere. Nevertheless, the researcher observed that there are notable factors which undermine the effectiveness of Facebook as a digital public sphere as observed on the discussions about Bond notes. Key to the discussion are factors like use of vulgar language, lack of conclusiveness in the discussions and lack of regulation and "in-house" rules.

The researcher observed that Facebook raises some ethical problems during a public discussion comprising people from different ethical backgrounds. This can be exemplified by the fact that some participants in the discussions resort to the use of vulgar language which is unhealthy to fruitful public discussions. Facebook assembles people from various ethical backgrounds and obscene language might cause discomfort to some members who consider use of vulgar as indecency. During Facebook discussions, little attention is paid to the existence of younger people, Christians and other groups of people with the potential of being negatively affected by

vulgar. However, breach of morals can also occur during face to face discussions but this usually happens in informal public spaces such as market places and very rarely in formal and professional ones like. Nevertheless, the extent to which it is observed on Facebook public discourse makes the rate of use higher than that witnessed during off-line public dialogue. It is observed that on *The Herald Facebook Page*, some comments contain discourteous language. Breach of morals on Facebook is due to lack of physical interaction, with participants “hiding” behind gadgets, resulting in some failing to show respect for others and using the platform to exercise uncouth behavior frowned upon in society. Below are example of comments with vulgar language posted on the Page during public discussions on Bond notes. These comments testify lack of ethics in Facebook discussions.

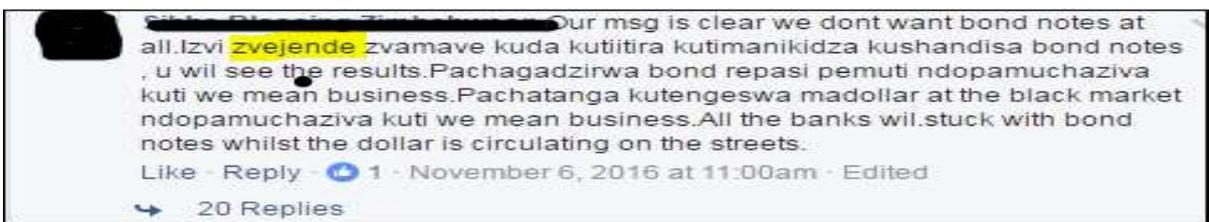




Figure: 13 Comments with vulgar language

In the first case, it is observed that amid individuals sharing their views in decent language, an individual posted a comment with a Shona obscene term *dhodhi* which translates to feces. In Shona societies, this word is not uttered liberally and, if said in public, invites uneasiness. Probably use of the vulgar term *dhodhi* was meant to emphasize the worthlessness of Bond notes. This is because in the society *dhodhi* is waste frowned upon when seen lying on open spaces. Toilets are built to dispose feces as they will be good for nothing. In the second scenario, the participant uses the Shona term *jende* which in English refers to testicles. In this context, it has been employed probably to show that there is senselessness in the government's introduction of Bond notes. So the terms *dhodhi* and *jende* are used to refer to Bond notes and this highlights the participants' impassioned protests against Bond notes.

In the third case, one refers to the other participant as *dako* a Shona word which in English refers to buttock. It is offensive in Shona societies to label someone *dako* since it signifies one's insignificance because the buttock is located at the back of one's body and referring to someone as *dako* signals that individual's lack of wits. In this case, it is used to signify that the participant has made an invalid contribution. In Shona society if someone is called *dako* it means that the individual occupies an insignificant position and what he or she says is rendered useless in that particular context. Nevertheless, vulgar comments were not given attention to during the discussions probably because issue on Bond notes was very sensitive where participants could not grapple with matters of other participants' lack of ethics on the platform. The researcher

observed that use of obscene language is also because of Facebook's licensing of freedom of expression which provides a lee-way for some participants to say whatever they wish in whatever kind of language they deem necessary.

Just like in some public discussions in the physical arena for instance in market places there is lack of regulation in Facebook public discussions. This undermines the effectiveness of Facebook as a public sphere since some individuals end up digressing from the discussion. This is due to the fact that Facebook is functioning as a spontaneous public sphere with limited regulations during discussions. In Facebook discussions, some participants end up posting comments with nothing to do with the issue being debated upon. It is observed that during *The Herald Facebook Page* public discussions on Bond notes some participants just "threw" comments completely unrelated to the issue of Bond notes.

Nevertheless, this could be due to the fact that participants on the Page were divided into various categories including optimists, neutrals and pessimists towards Bond notes as alluded to in the previous section. Therefore on one hand, it could be optimists who engaged in the business of posting "off topics" during discussions in order to divert pessimists' attention from lambasting Bond notes. On the other hand, it could be also pessimists unwilling to engage in a painful and sensitive subject of Bond notes. In addition it is probable that those individuals posted "off topics" just for fun or to neutralise the overheated arguments on the subject. This is because the question of the introduction of Bond notes was a sensitive issue received with mixed feelings among participants. Below is an extract of comments nothing to do with Bond notes.



Figure: 14 Off- Topic comment

In the first case, the participant meditates upon the good times they enjoyed at the crèche in the past. This has nothing to do with the issue of Bond notes being deliberated upon by other members. Nevertheless, it is also possible that the participant brought in the song to highlight the futility of Bond notes. Thus, the participant might be satirizing Bond notes. In the second scenario the participant is asking for a small pin Nokia Phone charger on the Page which again has nothing to do with Bond notes. Nevertheless, it is also probable that there are embedded meanings in these “off topics.” By making allusion to small pin Nokia charger, the participant might be commenting on Zimbabwe’s regression to times of economic suffering as experienced in 2008. This is because this is an era characterized by smartphones where small pin chargers are outdated versions with very few people using them. However, as observed in the last case these

off topic comments were ignored by other members who overly continued discussing Bond notes.

Furthermore, Facebook as an alternative public sphere is limited by the fact that the discussions are inconclusive. During Facebook public deliberations, participants do not reach a conclusion. This is observed on *The Herald Facebook Page* where participants did not agree on the way forward concerning Bond notes. From the five posts observed, discussions were left open-ended with optimists hoping to enjoy the “fruits” of Bond notes and pessimists emphasizing the impending economic catastrophe to be fueled by Bond notes. The fact that discussions are left hanging is qualified by the fact that Facebook users can still comment on older posts even if the issue “expired”, highlighting that there is a beginning but no clear end to public discussions on Bond notes.

In addition, the effectiveness of Facebook as a public sphere is undermined by the absence of agreement in terms of the common language to be used during discussions. It is observed that Facebook community in general constitute members with different language backgrounds. Failure in the establishment of a common language means language barrier between participants since others will find challenges in deducing meanings. It is observed on *The Herald Facebook Page* where members could use both English, Shona and Ndebele. This undermines effective dialogue since not all members are multilingual. This means that those who cannot understand one of the languages used cannot comprehend what the participant is saying. This demonstrates the lack of “in-house” rules on Facebook which can establish a common language like English which cuts across various societies. Below is an extract of comments in Ndebele, English and Shona.

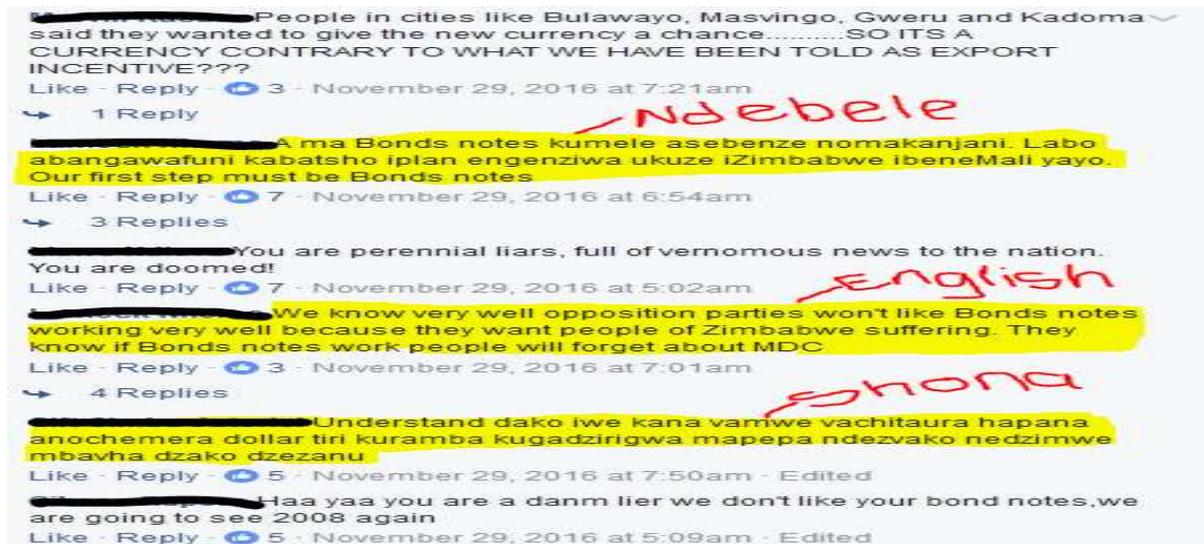


Figure: 15 Example of comments in 3 languages

Language plays a pivotal role in public discussions since it is the vehicle through which meanings are conveyed. Therefore, lack of a common language between a diversified public poses challenges in meaning construction. In an off-line public sphere, members agree on the language to be used, which is understood by all members and in this globalized world, English is in most cases preferred as the language for public debates.

4.5 Conclusion

The chapter presented and discussed research findings. Findings on the amenability of the Facebook Page application to the discussion of Bond notes have been discussed. Facebook dialogue on Bond notes have also been discussed in relation to Facebook as an alternative public sphere. Limitations of Facebook as an alternative arena for public dialogue were also highlighted and discussed. Nevertheless, these drawbacks do not dismiss the fact that Facebook has provided an alternative arena for public discussions in the digital era. The subsequent chapter gives a summation of the whole research and conclusions made. Potential areas for further research are also highlighted in the chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a summary of the research undertaken to examine Facebook as an alternative public sphere. A summation of the whole research is given through chapter summaries. Research conclusions are also highlighted in this chapter and they are given in relation to findings on each research objective. Potential areas for future research are also discussed.

5.2 Summary

Chapter one provided an introduction to the research. A background to the study was given in the chapter in order to contextualize the research. In addition, the statement of the problem which highlighted the gap which existed in the subject of social media as an alternative public sphere was given. Reasons for carrying out the study and research objectives were also covered in the chapter.

Chapter two consisted the literature review and theoretical framework. In the literature review the research examined gaps which existed in the already existing literature on the subject of social media use in relation to the idea of how the platforms function as arenas for public discussions. Literature was reviewed from a broader to a more specific perspective to cover literature on social media use in general and the use of social networking sites in Zimbabwe. The theoretical framework discussed the Public Sphere theory which informed the current research.

Chapter three outlined the methods adopted in order to accomplish the research. These included the adoption of qualitative methods, a case study, participant observation and purposive sampling methods, in particular Five posts from *The Herald Facebook Page* were purposefully selected based on the attention they attracted from the public regarding the issue of Bond notes in Zimbabwe. Data was collected through participant observation. The methods were instrumental in gathering data which was then discussed in chapter four.

Chapter four presented and analyzed data. The chapter consisted three sections. Firstly, data on the amenability of the Facebook Page application to public discussions on Bond notes was presented and analyzed. This was followed by an analysis of Facebook dialogue on Bond notes in relation to the notion of Facebook as an alternative public sphere. The chapter concluded with a discussion on the limitations of Facebook as a public sphere.

5.3 Conclusions

Research conclusions are drawn in relation to research objectives as highlighted below.

- Amenability of the Facebook Page application to public discussions on Bond notes.

From the research findings, it may be concluded that Facebook Page application provides a conducive arena for discussions for the Facebook online community. This is because the platform enables online convergence of thousands of people with the capacity of being both content originators and consumers. In addition, the Page application constitutes a number of features including the comment, reply and editing features which enable dialogic flow of information between participants. Nevertheless, it has been noted that individual posts are not given attention, rather only posts from the Page administrator incite public discussions. The *Sharing* option is not widely utilized on *The Herald Facebook Page* observed.

- Key points on Bond notes discussion on Facebook.

From the research findings, it may be concluded that the manner in which Page discussions are conducted qualify Facebook as an alternative platform where public debates take place. Observations on *The Herald Facebook Page* proved that dialogue take place between participants on the platform. Facebook is a digital site which promotes individual freedom of expression on matters of common interest. It also allows equal participation of heterogeneous group of participants to partake in the ongoing discussions. It is also concluded that discussions on the platform are informed by rational thinking. Such qualities highlight Facebook's adherence to Habermas' ideals of a public sphere.

- Limitations of Facebook as a public sphere.

Even though Facebook proves to be an efficient domain where the public can virtually assemble and engage in public dialogue on matters affecting the general populace, it also has notable limitations. From the findings these constitute lack of ethics, inconclusiveness and lack of in-house rules during the discussions. It must be taken into cognizance that these limitations are also similar to what transpires during offline public discussions. Nevertheless, the difference is on the extent to which they manifest on Facebook.

5.4 Potential areas for further research

This research does not mark the end of inquiries on the subject of social media as a public sphere in general and social networking sites in particular. Social media is a broad phenomenon which cannot be examined all at once. The subject is therefore liable to further research. Due to limited time of research, the current research specifically focused on how Facebook functions as a public sphere. The researcher paid closer attention to Facebook alone in order for the research to remain as narrowly focused and specific as possible. Future research can be conducted on other sites like WhatsApp since social networking sites operate at different levels. An exploration of how other SNSs function as alternative public spheres also gives room for comparison studies on how different SNSs parallel or depart from each other in serving as public spheres.

Furthermore, Facebook is a broad phenomenon with a myriad of features with the potential of facilitating public discussions. Due to limited time of study, the research specifically focused on how the Facebook Page application facilitates public discussions. Future research might therefore look at other features like the Group, News Feed and Events applications and explore how these features enable public discussions. There are also other issues which could not be explored due to the scope of the research, for instance how those public discussions on Facebook facilitate public opinion towards a particular issue. Upcoming research on the subject might need to explore how public opinion is facilitated during Facebook public discussions in diversified geographical settings.

Time restricted the researcher to observe public discussions on only one Zimbabwean Page, *The Herald Facebook Page*. This did not allow the researcher to come up with a conclusion on the trend of Page application usage for public discussions on various Zimbabwean Pages. The researcher observed that the *Sharing* option is not widely used on *The Herald Facebook Page* but could not arrive at a conclusion on whether this is true of other Zimbabwean Pages.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A



Appendix B

