

Comedy as journalism in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Post-2000, Zimbabwe has witnessed a gradual shrinking of communicative space. In its efforts to control the narrative about the causes of the country's multi-dimensional crisis, the ruling ZANU-PF government has used a gamut of legal and extra-judicial strategies to stifle press and other related freedoms. In this highly restrictive context, comedy has emerged as a viable source of information about events unfolding in the country as well as an alternative public sphere where counter-hegemonic discourses are ventilated by citizens who were previously excluded from the mainstream public sphere. Building on Mpofu's (2017) and Mano's (2007) studies on art and music as variants of journalism, our paper argues that comedy should be viewed as a variant of journalism in post-2000 Zimbabwe. We employ the normative roles of journalism, and Nancy Fraser's (1990) concept of the alternative public sphere as our framework for examining how comedy, and more specifically Comic Pastor's Monthly Comic Awards, has filled the void created by mainstream journalism by performing the journalistic function of communicating salient issues during the protracted Zimbabwean crisis. Our findings converge with, and broaden, Mpofu's (2017) and Mano's (2007) thesis that alternative sources of expression such as comedy should be viewed as journalism in crisis contexts. These findings also reinforce the need to expand traditional conceptions of journalism that narrowly limit the practice to traditional mass media.

Keywords: journalism, comedy, conflict, democracy, public sphere, hegemony

1. Introduction

The promise of democratisation in Zimbabwe started waning at the turn of the millennium when the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party, the former liberators, started faltering and citizens began drifting away from the liberation utopia (Mawere, 2020). While the year 2000 marked the major turning point in Zimbabwe's political life, signs of dictatorship became clear soon after independence with Zimbabwe's erstwhile leader, Robert

Mugabe, employing state media propaganda and brute force to euphemistically crush his enemies, those who belonged to the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU). The year 2000 saw a radical shift with ZANU-PF employing among others, state media propaganda, pungwes and vigils to try and garner support after the former liberators lost the constitutional referendum to the broad alliance of civil society organisations under the banner of the National Constitutional Assembly. This democratic retreat has seen the country degenerating into authoritarianism as the former 'liberators' turned into tyrants. Democratic regression in Zimbabwe post-2000 has been characterised by the collapse of critical democratic pillars such as the independence of the judiciary, a non-partisan police force and army, a functional parliament that did not rubber stamp the interests of the executive, free and fair elections and above all, a free and independent press (see Matsilele, 2013; Makwambeni & Adebayo, 2021).

A key feature of the Zimbabwean crisis has been the shrinking of communicative space as the government introduced several legal and extra-legal measures to monopolise the public sphere. The Broadcasting Services Act of 2001 and the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) of 2002 are some of the legislative pieces promulgated to stifle freedom of expression and that of the press (Willems, 2010; Matsilele, 2013). The legislation, often described as lawfare, has been used by the government to close independent newspapers so that only voices sympathetic with the ruling party's patriotic discourse can be heard (Makwambeni & Adebayo, 2022). The shrinking communicative space has seen the government mobilising state-controlled media to sell a narrow form of patriotic history and journalism to justify its continued rule (Willems, 2010). The form of patriotic journalism sold in state-controlled media has, inadvertently, attempted to silence any critical voice of 'patriotic' history or 'patriotic' journalism and often accusing critiques of wanting the opposite (Ranger, 2017, p. 10).

Beyond heavily legislative media space, the government went on to operate clandestine and extra-judicial activities. Bombing of the press, abductions and torture of private media aligned journalists and deporting international correspondents are some of the interventions the successive ZANU-PF governments incorporated. The shrinking communicative space in Zimbabwe has seen ordinary citizens using comedy to engage with the socio-political and economic challenges they face in the country (Chibwe & Ureke, 2016; Makwambeni & Adebayo, 2021). Despite the rising authoritarianism, that has seen journalists from the independent media and opposition leaders suffering from intimidation and harassment from state operatives sympathetic to the ruling ZANU-PF government, comedy has ironically flourished, providing Zimbabweans with comic relief as well as a relatively safer and innovative way of speaking truth to power (Monro, 2015). The past decade has witnessed a glut of online comedy shows (video skits) such as *Bus Stop TV* and *Comic Pastor's Monthly Comic Awards*, whose subscriptions have rivalled and at times exceeded those of leading state-controlled media in Zimbabwe. Notably, comedy has brought a paradigm shift in communication by ushering in a top-down approach to news production compared to mainstream media that has largely remained in the clutches of the dominant political and commercial forces in the country (Chibwe & Ureke, 2016).

Considering this background, this paper examines the role that comedy plays as a vehicle for communication in Zimbabwe post-2000. The paper argues that comedy should be viewed as journalism and an alternative public sphere through which Zimbabweans at the margins challenge power and share alternative news about the multi-dimensional crisis in the country. The study builds on earlier works by Mano (2007), *Music as Journalism*, and by Mpofu (2017), *Art as Journalism*, which argue for a reconceptualisation of journalism outside its conventional characterisation. Our paper deliberately leans on these two studies for specifically two reasons: First, the case studies proffered bear geographic resonance with our study. The two studies are rooted in the Zimbabwean context which also serves as our locus of enunciation. Second, the two studies focus on the arts industry in Zimbabwe. While Mano's study (2007) zooms into

music, and Mpofu's study focuses on the visual arts (2017), our paper explores comedy which is an emerging industry in the country. By examining the role of comedy as journalism in Zimbabwe post-2000, we seek to extend Mano's (2007) and Mpofu's (2017) theorisation and re-conceptualisation of journalism in the Zimbabwean context through the lenses of comedy.

Our argument that comedy should be viewed as a variant of journalism is premised on Mano's (2007) and McNair's (2005) conceptualisation of journalism. While Mano (2007, p. 61) posits that journalism is a profession or practice that involves 'collecting, writing, editing and presenting' news in the mass media, McNair (2005, p. 49) contends that journalism in all its manifestations is the 'constant background and accompaniment' to everyday life. Notably, these two understandings and definitions of journalism have an interesting convergence. They both view journalism as a profession that seeks to capture human experience through some form of medium. Mano challenges this confining understanding of journalism arguing that "journalism continues to be narrowly limited to the practice and output of a few traditional mass media: television, radio and newspapers" (2007, p. 61). Considering this critique, Mano evoking Adam (1993), presents an alternative conceptualisation of journalism that encompasses other forms of expression such as music. Thus, according to Mano, journalism should be viewed as a form of expression, an invention, a creation, that is a product of the imagination in both an individual and a cultural sense (2007, p. 61). Building on Mano's (2007) conceptualisation of music as journalism, Mpofu (2017) argues that the visual arts should also be viewed as a variant of journalism in times of crises, especially in semi-authoritarian contexts like Zimbabwe where the mass media has been captured by the ruling elite leaving an information vacuum in society. We argue in this paper that comedy like music and art should also be viewed as a variant of journalism in Zimbabwe that rivals mainstream journalism by providing citizens with an alternative sphere to engage on topics that are excluded from the mainstream public sphere.

2. Review of literature

2.1. The Zimbabwean crisis and the rise of comedy as a site of resistance

Since 2000, Zimbabwe has been embroiled in a multi-faceted crisis (Mhiripiri & Ureke, 2019; Tshuma 2023). The genesis of the Zimbabwean crisis is contested but scholars tend to concur that it resulted from the fast-track land reform programme, years of drought, famine, political authoritarianism, international isolation and economic mismanagement, among others (Zamponi, 2005). Although the Zimbabwean crisis was largely associated with the erstwhile leader, Robert Mugabe, who was deposed in 2017 through a military coup, the economic, political and social meltdown in the country has continued unabated under President Emmerson Mnangagwa's 'new dispensation'. A key feature of the Zimbabwean crisis has been a spirited attempt by the ruling ZANU-PF government to monopolise communicative space to control interpretations of the crisis. Faced by growing internal and external pressure, the ruling ZANU-PF government evoked patriotic history as a lens through which the Zimbabwe crisis began to be mediated by mainstream media. Patriotic history draws from ZANU-PF's role in the liberation struggle and is based on issues such as land, refusal of external interference, and a rejection of ideals such as human rights and good governance (Tendi, 2008). The by-product of patriotic history as a narrow form of nationalism has been the bifurcation of Zimbabweans into either patriots or sell-outs. Post-2000, the ruling ZANU-PF government through its cultural nationalist project captured the media and the arts to project itself as the only custodian of Zimbabwe's past, present and future with its interlocutors invariably described as sell-outs, puppets and or unAfrican (Tendi, 2008).

Mainstream media in Zimbabwe post-2000 became an elite public sphere dominated by

voices sympathetic with the ruling ZANU-PF government. Tendi (2008) notes that public intellectuals such as Vimbai Chivaura, Claude Mararike, Tafataona Mahoso and Isheunesu Mpepereki were recruited by a largely state-controlled media as expert voices to explain the Zimbabwean crisis using patriotic history. Beyond the mainstream media, post-2000 the ruling ZANU-PF government also intensified its efforts to harness art, drama and music as vehicles to safeguard its cultural nationalist project. With the shrinking communicative space, and the intensification of the ruling ZANU-PF government's cultural nationalism project, Zimbabweans at the margins began to appropriate digital media platforms to reflect the Zimbabwean crisis and to challenge ZANU-PF-centric discourses (see Makwambeni & Adebayo, 2021). Several studies have examined how digital media platforms have been used by civil society organisations, pressure groups, cultural activists and student bodies to mobilise and foster resistance against the ruling ZANU-PF government (Chitanana & Mutsvairo, 2019).

The closure of journalistic space in Zimbabwe post-2000 has seen the rise of comedy as an alternative space for citizens to both resist ZANU-PF hegemony and to communicate about state of the country's crisis (see Willems, 2010; Källstig, 2020; Makwambeni & Adebayo, 2021; Msimanga, 2022). Despite the severe restrictions to freedom of expression in Zimbabwe, comedy has emerged as a viable avenue for citizens at the margins to articulate their opinions both online and offline (Källstig, 2020). Several studies have examined comedy as a form of resistance in Zimbabwe (Matsilele, 2019; Källstig, 2021; Matsilele & Mututwa, 2021; Sharra & Matsilele, 2021; Tembo et al., 2022; Makwambeni & Adebayo, 2021; Msimanga, 2022; Mungwari & Kembo, 2022). These studies argue that comedy has become an archetype of resistance in a country where formal forms of resistance are virtually outlawed. Scholars such as Msimanga et al. (2022) have engaged with how comedy shows such as Magamba TV have used satire to resist corruption, social injustices, and human rights abuses in Zimbabwe's "New Dispensation". Comedy shows in Zimbabwe have drawn on the artistic to demand a rethinking of the status quo. Although this rethinking does not necessarily imply any palpable changes of the status quo, the artistic interventions are important in initiating conversations on Zimbabwe's past, present and future.

The nexus between comedy and resistance is not new in Zimbabwean culture and can be traced back to precolonial times. Matsilele (2019) contends that the practice of using humour (*kusvereredza* in Shona) to excoriate those in power has always been part of the Zimbabwean consciousness. This view is supported by Palmer (2003) who observes that joking and humour, although regulated, have always been a key feature of many tribes. Within the Zimbabwean experience, jokes and humour have been accommodated historically as a form of reprimanding power within acceptable limits. Thus, jokes and other humorous utterances, as Kuipers (2008, p. 365) argues "are a form of communication that is usually shared in social interaction". These humorous utterances are socially and culturally shaped and often quite particular to a specific time and place. While historically humour often took place in a carnival, with the advent of the internet and social media, the digital sphere has emerged as a new form of carnivalesque where counterhegemony is performed and power subverted (see Makwambeni & Adebayo, 2021).

A survey of literature shows that comedy across the African continent has frequently been studied in relation to power and resistance (Mbembe, 2001; Mason, 2002; Nyamnjoh, 2009). Studies have examined the ways in which comedy has been used to challenge power. African scholarship on humour and comedy has also reflected on the wider debate on the role of humour in mediating the relationship between political elites and 'citizens' in the post colony. Nyamnjoh (2009) argues that comedy and satire are vehicles for resistance that have been used to challenge self-centred and self-indulgent political elites whose actions and motives are in variance with those of the people they purport to serve. Thus, comedy and political satire in Africa are an avenue of challenging power and in the process exposing politicians and government officials to ridicule and laughter by ordinary people in society. Echoing Nyamnjoh (2009), Siziba and

Ncube (2015) note that satire is a form of silent resistance particularly in African countries that face military dictatorships and *de facto* one partyism. In the broader field of media and communication, scholars such as Willems (2010) have analysed comedy primarily as ideological texts that present framings of reality. Drawing on the Zimbabwean comic strip *Chikwama*, Willems (2021) has examined how political satire has been used to challenge hegemonic power in Zimbabwe. Källstig (2020) contends that interrogating comedy and humour is a critical exercise that assists scholars to see the limits and possibilities of comedic resistance as well as demonstrating how people continue to express themselves in political environments that attempt to silence them.

2.2. Comedy as a journalism

This paper contends that considering the shrinking communication space and the deepening crisis in Zimbabwe post-2000, comedy has emerged as journalism. This view is in tandem with Shapiro's (2016, p. 98) functional description of journalism as comprising "the activities involved in an independent pursuit of accurate information about current or recent events and its original presentation for public edification." We argue that in the Zimbabwean context, where accurate information and alternative views about the crisis are no longer found in the mainstream public media nor the independent private media, which have been captured by the ruling party sympathisers, unconventional spaces such as comedy, music and art have emerged as sources of information and alternative views (see Mpofu, 2019; Mano, 2007). Both public and private media serves the ruling ZANU-PF narratives, in part, due to the post-2017 military coup reconfigured ownership patterns and media political economy. Ruhanya's (2018) study that looked at survival strategies by the independent media concluded that forging good business relations with the ruling party has become part of the mix which has seen the adversarial role of the media disappearing.

Although our argument that comedy should be viewed as journalism in Zimbabwe post-2000 is new, a survey of literature shows that the concept of comedy as a form of journalism is not new. Fox (2018) contends that comedy can be viewed as a hybrid form of public discourse or satiric journalism. As observed in the United States, comedy in Zimbabwe is also increasingly occupying a civic duty of fostering civic engagement. Fox's argument on the role of comedy in fostering civic engagement finds resonance with Faina's (2013) study that flags three critical areas that describe the civic role of satirists and comedians: i) choices have consequences, ii) journalists engaged with public concerns should actively work to make issues other than political gamesmanship, and iii) journalists should always be attuned to the ways in which they frame their stories. A closer reading of these three aspects shows convergence between satirists and journalists which has left some scholars, such as Faina (2013) and Fox (2018), leaning towards the conceptualisation of comedy a journalism variant.

The contention that comedy should be viewed as journalism is also advanced by Baym (2005, p. 259) who notes that the boundaries between news and entertainment, and between public affairs and pop culture, have become difficult, if not impossible, to discern. This convergence between news and popular culture is further complicated by declining trust in the mainstream media which has created a vacuum for other alternative platforms. Baym (2005, p. 259) makes specific reference to the *Daily Show*, describing the show as a hybrid of comedy, news, and political conversation. *The Daily Show* reflects the futility of attempting to pigeonhole a comedy show that manifests elements of both critical and political journalism (see Fox, 2018). This view chimes with Faina's (2013, p. 541) who posits that John Stewart and Stephen Colbert's use of humour in comedy, which invites a heightened sense of participation in public life in the contemporary mass mediated landscape, fulfil the principles and promises of public journalism.

The advent of new communication technologies has brought new forms of alternative journalism with greater possibilities for transnational and even wider citizen participation and empowerment (Moyo, 2017). In the Zimbabwean context, comedy shows and skits that are broadcasted via social media platforms, have come to be viewed as oppositional journalism due to their propensity to offer alternative views that speak uncomfortable truths to power. These recent transformations in the digital sphere reflect the need to problematise and challenge traditional normative conceptualisations of journalism (Mano, 2007). Mano contends that journalism should not continue to be narrowly limited to the practice and output of a few traditional mass media such as television, radio and newspapers (2007). Instead, his study calls for an alternative conceptualisation of journalism that encompasses other forms of expression such as music and comedy, particularly in semi-authoritarian contexts like Zimbabwe where ordinary citizens have no access to the mainstream public sphere.

2.3. Comedy as an alternative public sphere

The shrinking communicative space in Zimbabwe post 2000 has opened a window for comedy as journalism to perform the normative role of journalism as an alternative public sphere. In this paper, we use the concept of the *alternative public sphere* to describe and evaluate the role of comedy as journalism in Zimbabwe. The concept has been widely used by media scholars to evaluate and assess the role of news in society (Dahlgren, 1995; Thompson, 1995). The concept of the alternative public sphere emerges from a critique of Habermas's *public sphere* (1989). The Habermasian public sphere is a space distinct from the state and the official economy where social meanings are invented, circulated, contested and reformulated (Fraser, 1990). Habermas's conception of the public sphere has been widely critiqued for its structural elitism. In her revision of the Habermasian public sphere, Fraser contends that there is no single monolithic mainstream public sphere but a few alternative spheres where subaltern groups seek to gain access and representation in the mainstream (1990). This view is corroborated by Makwambeni (2017) and Makwambeni and Adebayo's (2021) studies that show that in semi-authoritarian contexts like Zimbabwe, where the mainstream public sphere is monopolised and controlled by the ruling elite, alternative public spheres such as dancehall music and comic strips can serve as counterpublics where marginalised people can perform their identities and mount counterhegemonic struggles.

Alternative public spheres or subaltern counterpublics can be understood as parallel discursive arenas that emerge in stratified societies where unequal relations of dominance and subordination exist and participation among citizens in public debate is not possible (Fraser, 1990). In politics like Zimbabwe, where the mainstream public sphere is inaccessible, subordinated groups in society are deprived of arenas for deliberation about their needs and aspirations. Consequently, members of subordinated groups invent alternative public spheres where they forge counter discourses and formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs (Fraser, 1990). Several studies have shown that subaltern counterpublics have emerged and have been able to sustain and expand democratic discourse in Zimbabwe by allowing issues and assumptions that were previously exempt from contestation to be argued out publicly (see Makwambeni, 2017; Makwambeni & Adebayo, 2021). Notably, Fraser (1990) posits that subaltern counterpublics by their nature have a dual character: they function as spaces of withdrawal and regrouping as well as training grounds for agitational activities directed towards wider publics. They are also emancipatory in two ways: first, due to their ability to undermine the monopolistic participatory privileges enjoyed by dominant social groups in stratified societies; and, second, by their tendency to contest the exclusionary norms of the dominant public by forging alternative styles of political behaviour and alternative norms of public speech. However, although counterpublics have been lauded for expanding democratic

discourse and discursive space, they also have the potential to be anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian (Fraser, 1990).

This paper contends that Zimbabwe is a highly stratified and unequal country where the mainstream public sphere is monopolised by the ruling ZANU-PF government which excludes alternative views that challenge the ruling party's patriotic history (see Tendi, 2008; Makwambeni & Adebayo, 2021). We argue that in the Zimbabwean context, comedy has the potential to serve as a subaltern counterpublic where subordinated groups can challenge hegemonic power and deliberate on issues that are excluded from the mainstream public sphere. The paper further argues that comedy as journalism and an alternative public sphere resembles what Örnebring & Jönsson (2004) observes about tabloid journalism: comedy engages in a process of selecting and presenting news to subaltern audiences on issues previously ignored by mainstream media and is more in tune with societal changes than traditional media. In that vein, we submit that just as tabloid journalism is at the forefront of changing forms of journalism and public discourse (see Örnebring & Jönsson, 2004), comedy in Zimbabwe should also be viewed as journalism and an alternative public sphere that allows disenfranchised citizens to engage in public discourse.

3. Methodology

The study's examination of comedy as journalism in Zimbabwean post-2000 is informed by a qualitative methodology. The study purposively selected *Comic Pastor's monthly Comic Awards* show for analysis. The comic show was selected for two main reasons. First, it is one of the most consistent comedies show aired monthly on various social media platforms in Zimbabwe. Second, the *Monthly Comic Awards* are one of the most popular comedy shows in Zimbabwe. The show has more than 170,000 subscribers on YouTube, rivalling the biggest circulating newspapers in Zimbabwe. A total of 14 episodes (all the episodes in that period) from August 2022 to September 2023 were sampled for analysis. The period covered by the 14 episodes was selected based on its salience. It was an eventful period leading to the contested and disputed 2023 harmonised elections in Zimbabwe.

The 14 episodes that were purposively selected for analysis were subsequently analysed using qualitative content analysis. Bryman (2004) describes qualitative content analysis as a process of searching-out for underlying themes in materials being analysed. The research method emphasises the role of the investigator in the construction of the meaning of and in texts. When conducting qualitative content analysis, the emphasis is on allowing categories to emerge out of data and recognising the significance for understanding the meaning of the context in which an item being analysed appeared (Makwambeni & Matsilele, 2004; Bryman, 2004, p. 542).

In this study, qualitative content analysis was used to understand the key thematic issues that constitute the 'media or encoded text' in the 14 episodes of the monthly comic awards. Unlike in quantitative content analysis where the focus is on the frequency of particular themes as a reflection of particular phenomena, we employed a critical and interpretative approach which involved exploring the meanings that are embedded in the monthly comic awards. The overall aim of qualitative content analysis is to find out the patterns, ideas, thoughts, expressions and conceptions of media texts. The initial stage of the qualitative content analysis was aimed at familiarising ourselves with the 14 episodes sufficiently enough to be able to understand the key themes. The analysis at this point constituted a rudimentary textual analysis with the sole purpose of preparing the researchers for a more detailed analysis.

After getting a general picture of the themes and news content encoded in the monthly comic awards, the researchers proceeded to undertake a more detailed and systematic analysis as

advised by Bryman (2004) and Makwambeni and Sibiya (2022). This process involved probing into and discovering the content in the *Monthly Comic Awards* in a different way from the ordinary way of watching online videos (see Neuman, 1997). The study employed a summative and inductive qualitative content analysis. We first selected the unit of analysis for the study which is the 14 episodes of the monthly comic awards. We then watched each episode of the *Monthly Comic Awards* openly coding the content. This process involved writing notes and headings while watching each episode. We watched each episode several times making as many headings as possible and describing all aspects in the episode. We then collated the headings and notes from the two researchers engaged in the analysis onto the coding sheets while freely generating categories at this stage. We then proceeded to formulate preliminary codes. The emergent codes were then revised when inter-coder agreement was reached leading to the development of the categories that are discussed in the findings and discussion section of the study.

We created the categories in order to provide a means of describing the content in the *Monthly Comic Awards* as a form of news. As advised by Dey (1993) and Chikuni et al. (2021), we arrived at the categories in terms of what to put under the same thematic heading through interpretation and consensus. Each category was named using content-characteristic words. Ultimately, the categories that emerged were then coded. The researchers were cognisant of the significance of the socio-historical context in which the episodes of the comic awards were emerging from as advised by Bryman (2004). In the final analysis, the categories and themes that were identified through qualitative content analysis were related back to the Zimbabwean socio-historical context, the core theoretical elements of journalism and the alternative public sphere as derived from the literature review and the theoretical framework of the study.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Comedy as an alternative source of news to mainstream journalism in Zimbabwe

Our analysis of the fourteen episodes of *Comic Pastor's Monthly Comic Awards* shows that comedy in Zimbabwe, post-2000, is exploiting the vacuum created by mainstream journalism by performing the normative role of collecting, writing, editing and presenting news on salient political, social and economic realities in the country (see Mano, 2007). Like journalism, comedy is imagining and capturing time-slices of social reality for educational, information and entertainment purposes. It has become an alternative public sphere that covers issues that are not ventilated by state-controlled media and the private media who have become increasingly captured by rival political elites in the country. The episodes of the *Monthly Comic Awards* that were analysed in the study show evidence of normative journalism news practices of surveillance, news gathering, news selection, and gatekeeping (see Mpofu, 2017). The *Monthly Comic Awards* are presented in news format as an assemblage of social, political and economic events that would have taken place in Zimbabwe during a particular month. Episodes of the *Monthly Comic Awards* are between 30 and 40 minutes long and are all anchored by the Comic Pastor (Prosper Ngomashi). The news stories in the Comic Awards are structured in terms of hierarchy of importance and co-related by the Comic Pastor for viewers to consume in ways that resemble traditional news norms and values.

Our findings show that the *Monthly Comic Awards* share current information on a wide range of issues that include hyperinflation, electricity blackouts, corruption, parliamentary proceedings and other political developments unfolding in the country that do not find their way into the mainstream media. In the period analysed, namely from August 2022 to September 2023, the *Monthly Comic Awards* played the normative journalistic function of providing Zimbabweans with information about the harmonised 2023 presidential, parliamentary and local government elections in Zimbabwe. Unlike mainstream media that is state controlled and only

provides coverage to the ruling ZANU-PF party, the *Monthly Comic Awards* allow opposition parties and opposition voices to share their views without hindrance. For example, opposition leaders like Douglass Mwonozora were given space to articulate their views in the lead up to the 2023 elections as quoted below:

I am going to contest for state presidency. Not with an intention to accompany others but with an intention to win. We are going to garner 66% of the Presidential vote. Record it.
Zviripachena kuti Mwonozora anotora ne 66%. Muono wandinawo ndewekuti anotora ndi Douglass Mwonozora we MDC-T.
(It is clear Mwonozora will win the elections with 60%. I see Douglass Mwonozora of the MDC-T winning.)

The above quotations show that the Comic Awards are rivalling mainstream media in Zimbabwe by playing the journalistic function of reporting on political developments in the country. As observed by Mpofu (2019), in the polarised Zimbabwean context, where professional journalists have largely abdicated their duties, comedy like art has filled the vacuum by representing society in ways that traditional journalism is failing to do. In the lead up to the 2023 elections, the *Monthly Comic Awards* became an alternative source of news about political campaigns taking place in the country. The July 2023 episode of the *Monthly Comic Awards*, which is dubbed the “Month of Mayweather”, employed satire to both inform and poke fun at the ruling party’s Mabvuku parliamentary candidate, Scott Sakupwanya, for paying celebrity boxer Floyd Mayweather what is believed to be an outrageous amount to spare in front of hungry citizens as part of his election campaign. The *Comic Awards* used humour and satire to criticise the political elites for their excesses during the campaigns as captured below by the Comic Pastor in the news headlines:

Rega timuone (Mayweather) achirovera soft sparring vanhu vanenzara. Munhu angabva kuAmerica kuzoitira soft sparring’. Kuungana vanhu vakuru nevadiki kuti vaone munhu achirova punching bag. Ndozvinoita mari inonzi TMT Take Money Team.
(Let’s see Floyd Mayweather soft sparring for hungry people. How can someone come all the way from America to to engage in soft sparring. Old and young people coming to see a person punching a bag. That’s what money does. That’s why they are called TMT, Take Money Team.)

Our analyses of the episodes leading up to the August elections also covered political campaigns across the political divide in the country. Candidates such as Themba Mliswa and Dexter Nduna are shown on the campaign trail begging citizens to vote for them. In the lead up to the August 2023 elections comedy also became an alternative source of news that provided space to voices that advocated peace and tolerance. As observed by Mpofu (2017), in times of crisis, especially in a context where mainstream media is polarised, a vacuum of information is created that is then utilised by other variants of journalism. In this context, unlike the mainstream media that was highly polarised, the *Monthly Comic Awards* provided voice to citizens who advocated peace and mutual co-existence:

Vakomana vakatenderera July wese, tirikuti the message is clear, as we are heading towards elections, unoona vamwe vachibvisa maposter evamwe, vamwe vachiti tokurova, tirikuti Zimbabwe ndeyedu tese, tisu vene vayo ngatibatane.
(The message is clear. As we are heading towards elections you see people removing other parties’ posters while others threaten to be violent with you. Zimbabwe is for everyone. We are its rightful owners. Let’s unite.).
As CCC and ZANU-PF we need peace, hatidi kurwisana nezvinhu zvinopera in two months. Ida musangano wako ini ndoda wangu. One people, one nation, one vision.
(As CCC and ZANU-PF we need peace. Lets not fight about things that will end in two months

time. Love your party and I will love mine. One people, one nation, one vision.)

Although the ruling ZANU-PF government has introduced a raft of judicial and extra judicial measures that have closed journalistic space in the country (see Källstig, 2020; Makwambeni & Adebayo, 2021; Msimanga, 2022), our findings show that comedy has emerged as an alternative source of news for citizens to get information about the unfolding events in the country. For example, the May 2023 episode of the *Monthly Comic Awards* engages with citizens growing concerns about the electricity crisis in the country. The May 2023 episode employs humour to expose government's failure to address the energy crisis in the country. In the episode, the news anchor, the Comic Pastor, mocks the government for misleading Zimbabweans that the refurbishment of the Hwange Thermal power station Unit 7 would be the panacea to the country's protracted energy crisis. Unlike the state-controlled media that shuns news that reflect badly on the government and the ruling ZANU-PF government, the *Monthly Comic Awards* expose endemic corruption and maleficence perpetrated by the political elite in the country. News about the endemic corruption in the country is aptly captured in the March 2023 episode, of the *Monthly Comic Awards*. In the March episode, dubbed the "Month of Gold", the *Monthly Comic Awards* provided coverage to the alleged massive looting of gold by people connected to President Emmerson Mnangagwa, that was not covered by the state controlled media. One of the culprits involved in the looting, Prophet Angel is captured in the March episode, drawn from the Al Jazeera investigative documentary, boasting about his impunity:

I am the second largest diplomat in the country. Right now I can have a bag like this with 1.2 billion dollars (and gold) and put a red tape written diplomat and no one will search me at the airport.

The wide range of social, political and economic stories that are covered by the *Monthly Comic Awards* show that in times of crisis comedy can serve as journalism by performing the normative role of collecting and disseminating news about salient events taking place in a country (see Mano, 2007). The role performed by the *Comic Awards* in the Zimbabwean context corresponds with Conboy's (2013) conceptualisation of journalism as the provision of new, truthful, and factual accounts of the contemporary world. In the Zimbabwean context, the *Monthly Comic Awards* provide coverage to citizens with alternative views to criticise the deep-seated corruption bedeviling the country. A case in point is the March 2023 episode of the *Comic Awards* where a clip of an unnamed Chief is shared complaining about 'Matsotsi' (crooks) who are destroying the country:

Matsotsi in Zimbabwe should stop...pabuda mughodhi vabuda vati tisu...now oil yabuda Muzarabani....Toda upfumi hugovanwe sekuBotswana and UK kwete for a few.
(We want crooks to be stopped in Zimbabwe...wherever gold is discovered they say it is theirs. Now there is oil in Muzarabani. We want our wealth to be distributed fairly like in other countries like Botswana and UK. Our resources should not be shared by a few people.)

4.2. Comedy and news from below in Zimbabwe

Traditional and mainstream journalism in Zimbabwe tends to be elitist and is largely underpinned by news values such as prominence which tend to favour officialdom and the political elites in the country. However, our findings show that comedy as journalism in Zimbabwe has re-configured news practices and values by disrupting the routinised conduct of journalism's news production practices and reliance on officialdom which characterises traditional journalism (see Mpofu, 2019). The episodes of the *Monthly Comic Awards* analysed re-configure news practices and news values by giving voice to seemingly mundane issues

emerging from below that are often overlooked by mainstream media but afflict ordinary Zimbabweans. This form of journalism epitomises Örnebring and Jönsson's (2004) observations about tabloid journalism as a genre that engages in a process of selecting and presenting news to subaltern audiences on issues that were previously ignored by mainstream media.

In this light, our findings show that the *Monthly Comic Awards* as a form of journalism covers news from below as shown in the quotation below where an anonymous citizen is captured complaining about the immorality that has become pervasive in the country:

Village rino ranetsa rine mahure. Turume twacho atuna kudzikama. Chero wanguwo murume atori hure.

(This village is problematic, it is full of prostitutes. The men are indecent. Even my own husband is promiscuous.)

Reminiscent of tabloid journalism that is at the forefront in public discourse and engages with news from below (see Örnebring & Jönsson, 2004), episodes of the *Comic Awards* ventilate issues surrounding moral decay in Zimbabwe, where married couples are caught engaging in extramarital affairs. The *Monthly Comic Awards* as a form of journalism from below also covers news on issues such as the proliferation of illicit drugs and rampant alcohol abuse particularly by young people in Zimbabwe. It depicts how illicit drugs and alcohol are taking their toll on young people especially in the high-density suburbs. The issue of drugs is invariably depicted through episodes showing youths who are high on drugs and alcohol in poems that are recited in humorous ways like the one below:

Iyi nyaya yanetsa iyi. Ndakamboitaura nyaya iyi . Veruzhinji varikutukana nezvayo. Mumanewspapers, muma radio, nemuzvivhiti vhati. Nemudandemutande rangova rwiyo. Zvinodhakwa zvakambobvepi. Vechidiki vava mombe dzamashanga. Kumberereka nenyika.

(This issue has been problematic, I have spoken about it before. People are scolding each other about it. In the media it has become a swansong. Where did the drugs come from? The youths are now unruly. Walking aimlessly.)

The above examples show how the *Monthly Comic Awards* subvert traditional news values by also positioning ordinary citizens as subjects of news. The awards give coverage to what Makwambeni and Adebayo (2021) describe as the politics of the everyday where ordinary people like the ice-cream man from Chitungwiza who is captured being beaten by a mob for defrauding a female customer make the news headlines. Evidence of journalism from below and the 'tabloidisation of news' is also found in episodes of the *Monthly Comic Awards* that depict seemingly mundane stories focusing on paternity tests, infidelity and the proliferation of controversial 'Prophets' like Passion Java and Freddy who perform 'miracles' and give 'hope' to Zimbabweans who are caught up in a multi-dimensional crisis.

4.3. Comedy and the watchdog role in Zimbabwe post-2000

Normally, the role of journalists is not just confined to newsgathering and dissemination, it includes that of being watchdogs who monitor the excesses of those in positions of power (Mpofu, 2019). Post-2000, with the public media and to some extent the private media having abdicated their watchdog role due to factors that include government control and funding constraints, the mainstream media in Zimbabwe has rarely ventilated contentious issues that expose the political elite nor the ruling ZANU-PF party (Mpofu, 2017). Our findings show that with the myriad of constraints that journalists face in Zimbabwe post-2000 that impede their ability to perform their watchdog role, comedy has emerged as a form of journalism that enhances democracy by exposing malfeasance and speaking truth to power on issues that range

from government excesses to policy failures.

Our findings show that the *Monthly Comic Awards* reflect a convergence of satire, comedy and journalism and attest to the prevalence of what Faina (2013) and Fox (2018) describe as comedy as journalism. The *Comic Awards* use satire to perform the watchdog role by highlighting the ruling ZANU-PF government's excesses relating to freedom of expression. In the quote below, the Comic Pastor quips that the song "Munovapireiko doro" (Why do you give them alcohol) makes reference to the ruling party's youths who are captured in the Comic Awards advocating for the banning of musician on radio:

Comic: pada vaireva zvikomana izvi zvaiti musambo Winky should be banned on radio.
(Maybe they are referring to these boys who were saying that Winky D's music should be banned on radio.)

In the above quote, the Comic Pastor is chastising ZANU-PF youths who had held a press conference advocating for the banning of Winky D's music on the pretext that it corrupts the youths. Winky D's music has been unofficially banned on state controlled radio and television in Zimbabwe because of its engagement with issues such as corruption and unemployment that afflict the country. The quote below captures ZANU-PF youths claims about Winky D and his music :

Haana kunaka because anokonzera maGhetto youths ange ari kurwisana...music yake ino promoter hate speech kune vamwe.
(Winky D is a bad person because he instigates Ghetto youths to fight among themselves....his music promotes hate speech among people.)

The data analysed in the study shows that the *Monthly Comic Awards* also serve as a watchdog that warns and speaks about ill-conceived government policies such as the Presidential amnesty. After the premature release of 'unrepentant', 'unreformed' and 'unrehabilitated' prisoners such as Bobby Makaza, who were serving heinous crimes such as the rape of minors, the *Comic Awards* were able to speak truth to power by condemning the government. In the case in point, the *Comic Awards* covered the Presidential Amnesty by airing the "Tanzi tiende kumba" (we have been told to go home) where an unrepentant Bobby Makaza who engages in a dialogue with a journalist clearly shows that prison has not rehabilitated him:

Journalist: Kumusha ndekupi? (Where do you come from?)
Bobby Makaza: Kwamurehwa. (From Murehwa.)
Journalist: Manga mavanemakore mangani murimukati? (How long were you in prison?)
Bobby Makaza: Four years.
Journalist: Mhosha yamanga maisirwa mukati ndeyei? (What was your crime?)
Bobby Makaza: Ndeye rape. (Rape).
Journalist: Madzidzei kugara kwamaita mukati? (What did you learn while in prison?)
Bobby Makaza: Hanzi tiende kumba. (We were told to go home.)

The role of comedy as a watchdog in Zimbabwe post-2000 is also evident in the May 2023 episode, aptly described by the Comic Pastor as the "Month of Gold" or the "Month of the Mafia". In the May 2023 episode, the *Monthly Comic Awards* simultaneously informs and warns citizens about the rampant corruption that has pervaded the gold sector in Zimbabwe. Unlike the state-controlled media that did not cover the 'Gold Mafia' expose that first appeared in a Al Jazeera documentary, the *Monthly Comic Awards* became an alternative voice and space where the issue was ventilated.

In this light, the role that the *Monthly Comic Awards* have assumed in Zimbabwe post-2000

reflects Gilboa's (2005) contention that in times of crisis, journalists go beyond reporting to also participate in events and processes afflicting the country. This is evident where the *Monthly Comic Awards* assume an adversarial role by providing coverage on issues such as police brutality and corruption by political elites in the country. Thus, the *Comic Awards* have become a vehicle through which the afflictions of the subaltern, that are largely erased from mainstream media, are ventilated. Rather than just being a mirror of events unfolding in the country, the *Monthly Comic Awards* have also become a vehicle through which the ruling ZANU-PF government's power is censored. This adversarial role and engagement with power is further shown in instances where the *Monthly Comic Awards* use humour to lampoon the deification of President Mnangagwa by state-controlled media. The quote below, from the Comic Pastor, which is gleaned from an episode of the awards captures the abhorrent and deep-rooted sycophantic behavior that has taken root in Zimbabwe:

His Excellence gained another title. Not just your excellence. Dr, Commander in Chief, Chancellor of all state Universities but also a prophet.

Our analysis shows that the *Monthly Comic Awards* embody the tenets of satirical journalism as conceptualised by Fox (2018) in the United States of America, where the genre has assumed a civic duty and engages with public concerns as part of its watchdog role. As shown in the quote above, the *Monthly Comic Awards* do not only focus on the politics of the everyday but also grapple with major political issues that affect Zimbabweans. The episodes analysed show how the awards constantly use humour to critique on 'weighty' issues such as Zimbabwe's unequal and exploitative relations with China. The *Awards* often poke fun at the government's look East policy through episodes that depict the Chinese exploiting Zimbabweans predominantly in the mining and retail sectors. The awards serve both the watchdog and civic role by highlighting Chinese companies' unfair labour practices and 'siphoning' of minerals such as gold and diamonds.

4.4. Comedy as an alternative public sphere in Zimbabwe

Previous studies have shown that when mainstream public spheres are monopolised and controlled by the state or political elites, alternative spheres such as comedy and music can serve as counterpublics where subaltern populations can articulate their aspirations and resist hegemonic power (see Makwambeni, 2017; Tshuma et al., 2021; Makwambeni & Adebayo, 2021). Mano's (2007) and Mpofu's (2017) studies have shown that there is no longer a single monolithic public sphere in Zimbabwe, but instead several alternative spheres such as music and art that have arisen because of the shrinking of communicative space in the country. The advent of digital communication technologies in the last decade has further provided alternative public spheres that have empowered Zimbabweans to challenge hegemonic power that is largely performed through the state-controlled media (Chitanana, 2020). Digital technologies have provided space through which comedy shows like the *Monthly Comic Awards*, that critique hegemonic power and mobilise counterhegemonic ideologies against the establishment, are circulated.

Comedy has therefore provided Zimbabweans with what Spitulnik (2002) refers to as pockets of dialogue and resistance which align with the role of journalism in a democracy. We observe in this study that when the publicly owned and government-controlled media in Zimbabwe shuns reporting on contentious issues in the mainstream press, comedy performs the journalistic role of providing citizens who are largely excluded from mainstream media discourse with an alternative public sphere to engage and debate on issues that afflict them. For example, the *Monthly Comic Awards* as an alternative sphere have been able to contest the ruling ZANU-PF party's capture of religious groups such as the 'Mapostori' (Apostles). In the quote

below, the Comic Pastor mocks the ruling party for manipulating the ‘Mapostori’ who, according to him, now also desire to compete for parliamentary seats:

Vapostori varikutiwo tinomupinda mu parliament.
(Those from the Apostolic sect are also saying they want to get into parliament.)

The above comment is made after the Comic Awards had captured a clip showing the ‘Mapostori’ uncharacteristically singing about parliament:

Parliament, Parliament, Ginatsio. Parliament, parliament, Ginatsio.
(Parliament, parliament, Ignatius.)

Our findings show that the *Monthly Comic Awards* can be viewed as a counterpublic where the ruling ZANU-PF government’s patriotic history, which attributes the country’s crisis to external factors such as ‘targeted sanctions’ imposed on Zimbabwe by Britain, the European Union, United States of America and their allies (see Kriger, 2003), is contested by a counter discourse emerging from below that singles out internal factors such as misgovernance, corruption, political violence and human rights as the major drivers of the Zimbabwean crisis (see Mawere, 2000). Episodes of the *Comic Awards* that were analysed depict widespread corruption, human rights abuses, among other ills. This engagement with a wide range of issues show that comedy has opened alternative space for civic engagement that is de-institutionalised, de-professionalised and liberating.

The data analysed in the study shows that the *Monthly Comic Awards* function as journalism. The awards have emerged as an alternative sphere where citizens can critique and protest hegemonic power and ideas. Consequently, comedy like music and art provides Zimbabweans with space to voice their needs and aspirations which have been ignored by the ruling elite. Comedy, like art as journalism, as argued by Mpofu (2017), diagnoses Zimbabwe’s problems, subverts power, questions authority, calls for accountability, and persuades Zimbabwean citizens, particularly those excluded from mainstream public spheres, to reflect on their circumstances more critically. Thus, like traditional journalism, comedy as journalism is mediating between the state and the citizens in Zimbabwe post-2000.

5. Conclusion

Building on Mpofu’s (2019) and Mano’s (2007) studies on art and music as variants of journalism, our paper sought to examine the journalistic role played by comedy in the Zimbabwean crisis post-2000. The paper is premised on a conceptual framework consisting of the normative roles of journalism and Fraser’s conceptualisation of the alternative public sphere. Our findings, show that comedy can be viewed as journalism and an alternative public sphere that fills the vacuum left by mainstream journalism in the country post-2000. Besides providing an alternative public sphere where hegemonic power and ideas of the ruling party are contested and subverted, comedy is also performing the journalistic function of communicating salient issues unfolding in the country. Our finding reinforces Mpofu’s (2017) and Mano’s (2007) argument that alternatives sources of expression (such as comedy) that perform the journalistic watchdog role and engage in news routines such as the collection, processing and dissemination of news, should be viewed as journalism in crisis contexts such as Zimbabwe. We argue that unlike mainstream media that has largely remained elitist, comedy as a variant of journalism in the Zimbabwean crisis post-2000 has re-configured news practices by giving voice to seemingly mundane issues and ordinary citizens who are usually overlooked by mainstream media.

This paper has argued and demonstrated a case in which comedy can be seen as a form of

journalism. The study broadens Mpofu's (2017) and Mano's (2007) argument that journalism should be freed from its traditional conceptual strictures which do not embrace the journalistic function that other genres like comedy, art and music can serve in times of crisis. Our findings also show that comedy as journalism in Zimbabwe has reconfigured news practices by depicting issues that resonate with what subaltern Zimbabweans want, make and circulate amongst themselves outside the confines of mainstream journalism. The news created and circulated through comedy is different from what the Zimbabwean government wishes the people to consume (see Mano, 2007). This signifies the emergence of a journalism from below that gives voice not only to key national issues in the country, but also to the seemingly mundane issues afflicting the subalterns that are often overlooked by mainstream journalism. Such issues constitute what Makwambeni and Adebayo (2022) refer to as the *politics of the everyday*.

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