

# 16

## Citizen Journalism and the Ebola Outbreak in Africa

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This chapter analyses responses to news coverage of the 2014 Ebola virus by African media, a subject that has so far not been adequately discussed. It examines cases from “citizen media responses” in Zimbabwe and South Africa to determine the uniqueness of the African response to an African crisis. It investigates the attitudes and interpretations that were put forward by digital news media and responses from the news users. Our analysis of the news media responses highlights the importance of voice and agency, as it illustrates what happens when disenfranchised groups become the agents of their own stories. While there was, to some extent, significant overlaps between responses from within and outside of the continent, most interesting was perhaps the ways in which the stories revealed African citizen journalists as people with agency and power to define and shape the world around them.

### **Digital news and citizen responses**

News media coverage of the 2014 Ebola crisis in Africa was notable because of how the audience responded. The audience’s feedback, which is about how ordinary people play “an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and information” (Bowman and Willis, 2003, p. 9), is a key aspect of citizen journalism. The chapter is written at time (2015) when ordinary readers and users are increasingly commenting and sharing news stories. News, as Tuchman (1976) points out, is a constructed version of its source material and is a selective version of original realities. News is a deliberately constructed reality and a form of social knowledge (Allan, 1997). It is our argument here that responses to news stories on the 2014 outbreak of Ebola illustrated key elements of the emerging citizen-facing social media space in Africa. We are especially interested in how African readers/users responded to news on Ebola on online news sites. How was this form of citizen journalism responsive to the Ebola crisis, and what does it say about the media, users and their contexts? We analyse

citizen responses to news coverage of the 2014 Ebola outbreak in Zimbabwe and South Africa. How did southern Africans respond to the 2014 Ebola virus outbreak in West Africa?

Citizen journalism, it could be argued, gives people that are generally excluded or misrepresented by the mainstream commercial news the chance of making themselves heard. For a continent where democracy is constantly wavering, where much is still being negotiated in terms of its identity as a continent and the countries' identities as individual (though connected) nations, a belief that Africans' participation and contributions are not only voiced and listened to, but can make a difference, is crucial to restoring dignity and worth to those continually excluded and or marginalized in the cut-throat world of global politics. In fact, as O'Donnell and colleagues (2009), Couldry (2009) and Couldry and Ruiz (2012) argue, Cultural Studies has long assumed that the voices of those most affected by contemporary forms of oppression and exclusion need to be heard, and that academics who feel an affinity with these perspectives should work to facilitate that hearing. This chapter is one attempt at facilitating such hearing.

### **The 2014 Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea**

The journalists covering the 2014 Ebola virus can argue that they did not create the virus but simply represented reality or facts as it emerged. However, the news was constructed and influenced by news values and journalists' work environments, including expectations of their audience and employers. Ebola was in places that were not readily reachable or deemed unsafe by the media. This point is especially significant when considered alongside the view that journalists' construct news. As is observed by Schudson (2005, p. 173), journalists shape news texts, "They shape them, but they do not shape them as they choose." Unlike with previous disease outbreaks in Africa, this time, news about how Ebola has affected communities in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea, a specific region of Africa, was also captured and shared via phone technology, recorded telephone interviews, WhatsApp audio and photo functions, and SMS, both by professional and non-professional journalists. It is arguable that how the event was reported produced different forms of reality. It can be observed from the start that Africa has a population of 1.1 billion, 54 countries and is home to 15% of the world's population. Surprisingly, a crisis on the continent can result in the reduction of the continent to "one country" and the tarnishing of the image of all Africans across the world. The panic and sensational responses to the outbreak of the Ebola virus prompted one Hannah Giorgis (2014) to observe that: "The problem with the West's Ebola response is still fear of a black patient" – the heading of her story published by British newspaper, *The Guardian*. Her account captured the exaggerated fear and widespread racialized responses by the "West" or some developed countries to the outbreak of

the Ebola virus, then largely restricted to Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea. Our analysis of digital news coverage and responses to the 2014 outbreak of the Ebola in Africa must be considered within the context of local and global transformations. It can also be argued that, to a large extent, Western media responses to the 2014 Ebola outbreak added to historical and contemporary accounts of “othering” Africa (Mano, 2015). This chapter is an attempt to unpack the debate arising from media articulations by Africans in African media spaces. We wanted to investigate the extent and character of local debates on the crisis.

The news of the Ebola virus was not new, as initial reports date back to the 1970s minor outbreaks in Zaire, Sudan and Reston among other places. It can be observed that the specific strain (EBOV) of the 2014 outbreak in West Africa was similar to the one in Zaire in 1976 (WHO, 2015). It was traced to the Ebola River region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), from where the name is derived. The main symptoms varied from case to case but the most common indications are diarrhoea, abdominal pains and vomiting, which, over the course of several days, escalate to bleeding internally and externally through eyes, ears, nose and mouth. The virus is transmitted through contact with infected bodily fluids. Ebola has a fatality rate of 90% of all those diagnosed.

We should make it clear that the disease produced fear and stigma across Africa. It is our view that there was even more fear that Ebola would threaten Westerners, as had happened with HIV and AIDS. Flights to and from West Africa were cancelled. Western soldiers were deployed to West Africa to deal with the problem. In relation to this, Giorgis (2014) pointed out that:

Ebola now functions in popular discourse as a not-so-subtle, almost completely rhetorical stand-in for any combination of “African-ness”, “blackness”, “foreign-ness” and “infestation” – a nebulous but powerful threat, poised to ruin the perceived purity of western borders and bodies. Dead African bodies are the nameless placeholders for (unwarranted, racist) “panic”, a conversation topic too heavy for the dinner table yet light enough for supermarket aisles.

If, as stated in this quote, the Western response was racist and negative, one would expect African responses to be different and more appreciate of an African crisis. We wanted to know how citizens using African digital social media dealt with the problem. In the section “The emerging Internet space in Africa”, we discuss the increasing role of the Internet and digital connectivity in Africa.

### **The emerging Internet space in Africa**

The Internet reaches only a minute proportion of African urban dwellers and virtually none outside the elite of the larger cities (Njogu and Middleton,

2009). Regardless of this observation, it is increasingly accepted that the Internet is opening up new possibilities that have allowed both citizens and journalists in Africa to creatively engage with mainstream politics (Jensen, 2000; Nyamnjoh, 2005; Spitulnik, 2002). As with other parts of the world, despite the slow growth in the numbers of Internet users, “a rather small minority of these Internet users has the capability to use it in ways that are creative and that augment their ability to participate effectively in today’s knowledge societies” (Mansell, 2004, p. 179). This is linked to the point that what is most essential to understanding the technical, organizational and cultural characteristics of the Internet is the way other communication networks have converged into the Internet (Castells, 1996, p. 351). Digital technology has enabled people to package multimedia messages, including sound, images and data “without using control centres” (Ibid.). In Africa, this has particularly been the case after 2000, when there has been a relative increase in Internet media. The new and diverse types of media are allowing new voices and are exerting pressure on political processes in Africa (Tettey, 2009). The establishment of more media from below has encouraged ordinary Africans to begin to theorize about both new and old media in new ways. For example, the notion of victimhood, which often presents Africans as powerless victims of officialdom, is now being reconsidered in the context that, however powerful and repressive some African governments or global conditions are, “there is always room – sometimes through radical or alternate media for initiative and agency to challenge domination, exploitation and the globalisation of poverty” (Nyamnjoh, 2005, p. 204). Moyo (2009) adds to this that on the Internet, “[t]he non-professional journalists are not accountable to anyone but themselves, and their ‘journalism’ is not guided or constrained by any ethical norms or principles but rather by gut feeling and commonsense. In a crisis situation . . . citizen journalism could worsen things by spreading untruths and half-truths which could lead to panic and disorder” (Moyo 2009: 12). We sought to consider the responses to digital news on the 2014 Ebola outbreak in Zimbabwe and South Africa as way of gauging the role and function of citizen journalism during a major African health crisis.

## Methodology

The research adopted a qualitative design in the sense it mainly involved content illustration of the news stories on Ebola alongside textual analysis of key examples chosen. It preferred convenient sampling of evidence left by readers/users of African digital news sites. Unlike content analysis, which offers a systematic account of words within texts by quantifying and analysing them, content illustration is more concerned with providing examples of the character and tone of coverage, using headlines and other elements of the news stories. If done properly, content illustration can also enable one to make inferences about the attitudes and meanings from

writers and audiences on news stories in relation to the issue of Ebola. The overall framework for the collection and analysis of data was according to the priorities set by us as the researchers. A robust research design allows one to deal with the core issues under investigation. The identity and behaviour of online audiences is complex and susceptible to manipulation to some extent; this should be considered when evaluating their feedback.

### **Ebola in the Zimbabwean media**

In the wake of the Ebola crisis of 2014 the Zimbabwe government created a website on 30 October 2014. Paul Chimedza, the deputy minister in the Health Ministry, described it as a response to the lack of knowledge about the disease among locals that had resulted in public fear. Of interest here is how the website was also a response to discourses about in Ebola in social media:

We were losing the fight in our quest to tell the people that there is no Ebola in the country on the social media . . . . A lot of false stories, some of which include that there was an Ebola patient in Murehwa circulated on whatsapp (sic) and we realised the need to set up this social media platform to dispel such stories officially.

In a way, the problem illustrated the impact of social media practices on the news agenda of the government. As discussed by Hirst (2011, p. 109): “digital media are creating the conditions for audience members to make the transition from ‘passive receivers’ to ‘proactive consumers’, who decide what they want, when they want it and how they want it”. However, one can question the extent to which the Zimbabwe government’s website managed to defeat the “rumours” on the Ebola situation within citizen journalists’ platforms.

The emergence of new forms of media is dependent on existing media. In the case of Zimbabwe, the century-old and government-controlled *Herald* newspaper has adapted and evolved into the digital era. Apart from its daily print run of 100,000 and a big secondary market where one copy can be read by 5–10 people, *The Herald* has an online edition that is also read by an estimated 3 million people in the diaspora. Digital readers/users leave comments and, in the process, share news. As is noted by Jenkins (2006, pp. 18–19):

Convergence requires media companies to rethink old assumptions about what it means to consume media, assumptions that shape both programming and marketing decisions. If old consumers were assumed to be passive, the new consumers are active. If old consumers were predictable and stayed where you told them to stay, then new consumers are migratory, showing a declining loyalty to networks or media. If old

consumers were isolated individuals, the new consumers are more socially connected. If the work of media consumers was once silent and invisible, the new consumers are now noisy and public.

In the Zimbabwean case, the new consumer using new media tools is complementing and changing the news agenda, which has, so far, been dominated by news institutions such as *The Herald*.

Prior to the March 2014 outbreak of Ebola in West Africa, *The Herald* had last published a major story on the disease on 18 September 2012, entitled, "Ebola claims up to 32 lives in DRC: WHO". It routinely reported the deaths of ordinary people from DRC, including that of a woman who had just given birth. It can be observed that the number of Ebola news stories in *The Herald* in the aftermath of the March 2014 outbreak was low, but the stories later gathered pace and were in line with the pro-government character of the newspaper in assuring the public that Zimbabwe was able to deal with Ebola. While the online edition of *The Herald* reported on the suffering and deaths from Ebola abroad, it also hyped the Zimbabwe government's preparedness to tackle the disease. It sought to downplay perspectives that the Zimbabwe government was not in control of the Ebola problem as illustrated by the examples that follow (Table 16.1):

Table 16.1 Selected headlines of news stories in the digital edition of *The Herald* (2014)

Headline	Date	Overall tone
"Ebola claims 59 in Guinea"	24 March 2014	Disease out of control
"Fear grips Guinea"	27 March 2014	Disease out of control
"Zimbabwe on the lookout for the Ebola virus"	27 March 2014	State able to protect citizens
"Ghana responds to Ebola threat"	28 March 2014	State able to protect citizens
"Senegal closes border over Ebola"	31 March 2014	State able to protect citizens
"Liberia confirms first case of Ebola"	1 April 2014	Disease out of control
"April outbreak response scales up"	12 April 2014	Disease out of control
"Ebola outbreak: Ghana tests US man"	8 July 2014	State able to protect citizens
"Govt commences Ebola specialists training"	7 August 2014	State able to protect citizens
"Zim sets up Ebola monitoring at borders"	21 August 2014	State able to protect citizens
"Govt warns over Nigeria visits"	22 August 2014	State able to protect citizens
"21-day quarantine for Ebola suspects"	29 August 2014	State able to protect citizens

Table 16.1 (Continued)

Headline	Date	Overall tone
"SA turns truckers away over Ebola"	1 September 2014	State able to protect citizens
"Zim can handle Ebola outbreak says US expert"	28 October 2014	State able to protect citizens
"20 Zim experts to help fight Ebola"	8 November 2014	State able to protect citizens
"800 screened for Ebola virus"	24 November 2014	State able to protect citizens
"Screening for Ebola intensifies"	23 December 2014	State able to protect citizens
"Ebola affects Zim tourism"	30 December 2014	State able to protect citizens

Not all the digital news stories on Ebola in *The Herald* attracted comments from the readers. As the headlines in Table 16.1 show, the coverage emphasized the government's preparedness, training issues and the availability of expertise to handle the Ebola crisis should it enter Zimbabwe. The dominant tone was to assure citizens of state protection. In response to a story in *The Herald* entitled "Ebola: Sick American to be treated in the US" (2 August 2014), one reader responded as follows: "These guys are brave . . . if I see you laying (sic) there, blood coming out of your eyes and mouth, frothing and sh#t . . . you aint gonna make it." The comment illustrated the fear that the public had of Ebola and seemed to justify the reassurance that was evident in *The Herald*. The discourse in *The Herald* was in sharp contrast with critical coverage in privately owned media, which emphasized that Zimbabwe had no capacity to conduct tests to detect the deadly Ebola disease, as specimens from suspected cases were being referred to South African laboratories for verification. The Zimbabwe government was also worried about the negative stories on Ebola because of its effect on tourism, as was shown by the story from 30 December 2014. In response to that story, a more critical reader observed:

Anon: This has little to do with Ebola but more to do with how we have priced ourselves out of competition. Visitors who have travelled to Zim recently says (sic) it is an expensive country to visit and word goes round quickly. There is a big world out there where you can get more bang for your bucks.

This is a clear case of citizen journalism challenging the official view that Ebola rumours were affecting tourism. To some extent, citizen journalism has provided the means to challenge and correct distorted official views. In response to a news feature entitled, "The most effective treatment against

Ebola ‘might be having a white skin’ ” by Kwei Quartey, published in *The Herald*, one reader, Ian, stated:

This should serve as a wake-up call to Africa to start making serious effort to stand on its own feet rather than continuing to depend on other people for all its needs. Being one of the richest continents, Africa can and should be able to easily find solutions to such problems as Ebola. Unfortunately, this is currently not being done due to corruption, etc.

(*The Herald*, 1 December 2014)

The reader offers a critical interpretation, and focuses on corruption as the main issue in dealing with Ebola. As will be seen in the South African case, the disease was an opportunity for locals to attack maladministration and the self-centred approach by Zimbabwean leaders.

In response to the news story, “800 screened for Ebola virus”, in *The Herald*, 24 November 2014, one reader stated that they would not be surprised if Ebola did come to Zimbabwe, which again was a criticism and vivid mockery of the preparedness of Zimbabwe in the face of the disease. More interesting in response to the same story, a reader, describing their role as that of a Command Centre, stated that: “Mortality rate according to your figures is  $(5,100/13,000) = 39.23\%$ . Therefore survival rate is  $61.77\%$  . . . I don’t know if I am wrong. Interesting, Ebola has no cure, but more than 60% of affected people SURVIVE(D), Health experts, tell US!!!” The cynical comments from readers are even clearer in response to the story headlined “Zimbabwe can produce Ebola drug” published on 14 November 2014:

**Guest:** *hahahahahahahahahahaha* [a laugh, which represents an ability to see through and a refusal to be taken in]

**Doufi:** *I can grow rubber trees, so I can produce vehicle tyres. I farm cocoa and can produce chocolate to compete with the Swiss. Really, our biotechnology graduates already that good? Clever nations work quietly and only announce after a breakthrough including clinical trials. I think we talk too much as a nation.*

**Mazorodz:** *Doufi: Zimbabwe will host the next olympics!*

**Changoti Bruuuuu:** *Muchitamba nezvimwe murikutadza kupa vanhu mvura yakachena makutaura zve Ebola*

**GR8ZIMBO:** *We can dream of killing a lion . . . .yet we cant (sic) even dare to face a chihuahua (sic). Zimbo reasoning for you*

**James Bond:** *Both the writer and his main source must grow some brains*

It is clear from this that the readers doubted the stance of the government and openly expressed their fears in comments on the stories. The citizen feedback illustrated mixed views on the origins and effects of the disease, and mocked official claims on preparedness.

## **Ebola stories on New Zimbabwe and feedback from the readers**

A Google search of Ebola stories on [www.NewZimbabwe.com](http://www.NewZimbabwe.com) revealed 24,000 news stories, but not all of them were written by journalists on the site. Privately owned NewZimbabwe:

[A]dvertises itself through various slogans such as “the Zimbabwe news you trust”, “the biggest name in Zimbabwe news” and “breaking news as it happens”. The website features news items, both written in-house and compiled from other sources, as well as showbiz news, sports, columns and opinion articles.

(Mano and Willems, 2010)

The front page of NewZimbabwe is modelled along the lines of a British tabloid, with headlines in big capital letters and bold and provocative headlines. As stated by Mano and Willems (2010), apart from news articles and advertisements, visitors are also encouraged to join “the debate” on the discussion forum section of the website, which has proven very popular with the 8,152 members registered in May 2006. New members can join by simply choosing a username and password, which provides them with access to the forums. The forum section has been divided into debates on different categories of topics: general discussion, high school reunions, audience with a politician, talking sport, hot gossip, humour, relationships, technology, music and entertainment, religious corner, health and lifestyle and so on. Discussions are mostly held in English and Shona, or Shonglish, which refers to the mixture of Shona and English that is common among Zimbabweans, and sometimes Ndebele is also used. This shows that Zimbabwean news publications are read and used by citizens in and outside the country. Previous research has suggested that a significant number of participants in the NewZimbabwe forums are Zimbabweans based in the United Kingdom (Mano and Willems, 2010).

As can be seen in Table 16.2, headlines on the 2014 Ebola outbreak on the NewZimbabwe site were sensational and alarmist, exaggerating the impact.

The stories appearing on the NewZimbabwe site differed from those in *The Herald* in the sense that they projected the image of the Zimbabwean government as hiding Ebola information for fear of losing tourism. They highlighted possible cases of infection and provided information on “suspects”, alongside allegations from Namibia. One of the stories to attract feedback from readers was “Ebola: Zimbabwe monitors suspects”, which was written by a NewZimbabwe staff reporter (10 August 2014). It was shared on Facebook 103 times and tweeted 4 times. The NewZimbabwe readers challenged Zimbabwe’s health authorities’s ability to stop the deadly Ebola virus

Table 16.2 Selected headlines on the Ebola 2014 news stories on www.NewZimbabwe.com

Headline	Date	Overall tone
"Ebola costs Zimbabwe tourism \$6m: ZTA"	29 September 2014	State hiding Ebola victims
"Ebola outbreak threat in Zim 'real': Minister"	31 July 2014	State hiding Ebola victims
"Ebola: Zimbabwe monitors suspects"	10 August 2014	State hiding Ebola victims
"Ebola: Namibians told to avoid Zimbabwe"	25 September 2014	State hiding Ebola victims
"There is no Ebola here Zim tells Namibia"	28 September 2014	State hiding Ebola victims
"Lockdown in Harare over Ebola scare"	9 October 2014	State hiding Ebola victims
"Wilkins still closed over Ebola scare"	13 October 2014	State hiding Ebola victims
"Ebola affects local tourism industry"	30 December 2014	State hiding Ebola victims

from entering the country, and mocked the 21-day health surveillance for Ebola symptoms as ineffectual. As stated by one James Bond: "I hope to high heavens Ebola doesn't spread to Zimbabwe, as I fear that will be the end of a nation given the socioeconomic malaise we are faced with." Similarly, another reader by the name Wilbert added: "In a country that cannot even guarantee clean running water in all its major cities and towns, Ebola outbreak will mean hell! The measures this Mugabe regime has put in place to stop the spread of the virus are laughable!" The readers used the story to debate the inhabitable conditions in the country. They expressed cynicism by using kkkkk – (symbols, signalling laughter among social media users in Zimbabweans). The overriding concern with governance in the responses to one of the major initiatives Zimbabwe government can be seen as follows:

*ngozi yemakhosi: They can't even handle Cholera (sic) let alone Ebhola (sic). Nxa!*

*Dr. Nikuv Riggington (PhD): Tazopera manje! [We are finished]*

*Nkosinathi: But we have been having Ebola for a very long time in Zimbabwe. Zanu is a deadly Ebola disease that has no treatment and it has been spread by Mugabe since 1980*

*Guest: Kikikikikiki nhasi ndaseka!!! [I have laughed so much today!!!]*

Using English, Ndebele and Shona languages, these online Zimbabweans take advantage of their anonymity to attack the Zimbabwean government

response to the crisis. They base their arguments on how the Zimbabwean government has failed to deal with HIV, AIDS and cholera. Indeed, they perceive the government led by Mugabe as the problem. It is also true that online behaviour can be staged or manipulated by non-state interests. Reading through the responses on NewZimbabwe, one can discern activism for and against the state. The communities on the site seem to have rehearsed positions from which to comment on every issue. Nonetheless, the fact that the Ebola issue is read into local challenges is unmistakable.

### **Ebola in the South African Media**

South Africa's top digital news platform, News24.com, comprises both a "professional" journalism space as well as a dedicated citizen journalism space, MyNews24 (located at <http://my.news24.com>). MyNews24 is touted as a citizen journalism website, albeit one that was launched, marketed and run within the mainstream, commercial news site News24. Coverage of Ebola in both these spaces started slow, with only 15 articles on News24 during March 2014 and none on MyNews24 at all for the same period. The slow uptake of the Ebola story on the citizen journalism website is not surprising, as a cursory glance of the headlines generated by the "ebola-tag" on its parent website, News24.com, reveals that news was slow on the topic until July 2014 – thus roughly the same time as the international community led by WHO – recognised Ebola as a crisis of epidemic proportions. By then, there were already thousands of deaths attributed to the virus. The first article in this regard, entitled "Ebola – the scary truth", was posted on 4 April 2014. Highlighting the fact that Ebola was starting to enter the consciousness of users and readers of MyNews24, is the fact that this article clearly generated readership interest – it was viewed 2599 times although it only attracted 9 comments. Table 16.3 below, provides an overview of the headlines of the Ebola news stories on MyNews24, with their corresponding thematic fit which is indicative of the overall tone of the stories. The stories are ranked in order of readership, that is, the story which generated the most views – regardless of when it appeared and how many comments it attracted – is considered the top story in terms of what users of the MyNews24 space considers newsworthy. As can be seen though, there is generally congruence between the most "newsworthy" stories in this respect and the most "comment-worthy" stories from a reader's perspective. As with the coverage of other deadly diseases – i.e. HIV/AIDS, SARS, etc. – the headlines assumes a war rhetoric in which the disease becomes the perpetrator and the regions and peoples affected become the victims. In this rhetoric, as evidenced below, it is inevitable that binary oppositions will function prominently in an effort to not only make sense of disease, but also to emerge victorious from its grip:

Table 16.3 Ebola news stories on MyNews24 ranked in order of “newsworthiness”

Headline	Number of views	Number of comments	Theme and overall tone of coverage
Reports of Ebola conspiracy are worrying	7,248	16	Conspiracy theories
Ebola outbreak – the scary truth	2,599	9	Ebola “winning” the “fight”
<b>Ebola Haven</b>	1,559	4	Healthcare
SA at risk from Ebola?	1,274	20	Impact on South Africa
EVD, Africa’s leading fatality	835	13	Ebola “winning” the “fight”
Guttersnipe media and the Ebola crisis – what are they playing at?	778	7	The media and Ebola: analysis of media coverage and impact
Ebola insurance	557	1	Impact on South Africa; Healthcare
Ebola: How does it affect us?	365	4	Impact on South Africa
Ebola outbreak exposes lack of cooperation and solidarity among African nations	322	1	One Africa?; Africa’s Ebola friends and foes
Ebola and you	300	11	Ebola “winning” the “fight”
Why I love West Africa – minus Ebola	226	2	One Africa?
Is God upset with Africa?	137	10	An African disease?

We hypothesized that coverage of Ebola by citizen journalists from southern Africa would differ in range and tone from the coverage of the disease by mainstream Western journalists and news outlets, and, for the South African case study under scrutiny here, we further assumed that citizens would shift the focus of the Ebola stories to better serve their socio-political interests and affiliations. The remainder of this section tests these assumptions through a qualitative analysis of the Ebola news stories on MyNews24. While it is tempting to discuss the stories in thematically outlined depth, the restrictions imposed on any individual chapter in a book does not allow for such an approach. Instead, we will treat the stories and their thematic foci in a generalized analytical discussion geared towards highlighting the ways in which “ordinary” citizens interact with the media, and the spaces that such interaction opens up, allowing a range of views on any singular topic.

It is perhaps not surprising that the first story penned by a citizen journalist on MyNews24 adds to the Ebola panic instigated by mainstream coverage of the disease at the start of the outbreak. The story, headlined

"Ebola Outbreak – The Scary Truth", at first glance appears to be one that would advance some or other conspiracy theory (i.e. the "scary truth"), but upon reading it, one soon realizes that the article is, rather, an attempt at scientific explanation of what Ebola is, how it evolves and what its impact is. Nonetheless, like countless Western accounts meant to scare and awe, this article opens with a dramatic account of the impact of the disease, noting in its opening sentence that: "Doctors work quickly to remove the infected body of one of the Ebola virus' victims." Here already, the binary "perpetrator" versus "victim" – so evident in war rhetoric – is set up. The author then devotes the entire first paragraph to illustrate just how "dreadful" the disease is via a death tally (83 dead), emphasizing the devastation of the disease ("...incurable, devastating, painful") and finally – tapping into another popular theme in mainstream news coverage of the disease – noting its impact on border crossing both within and outside the continent (Saudi Arabia stating that they will refuse entry to citizens of the affected countries, and Senegal having already closed its borders "completely"). The article had attracted 2,599 views at the time of writing this (2015) – second only to the article entitled "Reports of Ebola Conspiracy are Worrying", which attracted 7,248 views. The popularity of the "scary truth" article can perhaps be explained by the double entendre in its headline, which appears to suggest, like many articles espousing conspiracy theories, that there might be a hidden truth not yet shared with readers which will be revealed in this article. In spite of this not being the case here – as mentioned, the article presents a medical-scientific explication of Ebola – the article attracted nine comments – this is the sixth highest response rate for all articles about Ebola on MyNews24. In comparison, the story entitled "EVD, Africa's leading fatality", which similarly attempts to explicate Ebola from a medical-scientific point of view, generated only 835 views, but attracted 13 comments. This story touches on the same themes as the first one, including a focus on Ebola as a killer of "numerous" people, medical facts about the virus, the need for travel precautions, if not restrictions, and the virus's possible impact on South Africa (quoting the Health Minister, the article concludes that the risk is minimal, but that South Africa is prepared should a case/cases be detected). The story entitled "Ebola: How does it affect us", attempts to explicate Ebola in relation to other virus outbreaks from a medical-scientific point of view. Stating that it wishes to "THINK" about Ebola through a focus on some facts which would allow us (author and readers) to "...draw our own conclusions", the article weaves through a focus on, by now (4 November 2014 – nine months after the first reports of an epidemic), well-known facts about the disease, through a focus on historical information about the first recorded outbreak of a "filovirus", which the author traces to Germany in 1967. In this story, posted on the website by a medical doctor, at least five themes emerge. The first trace of a conspiracy theory about Ebola as an invention by the West emerges (the author implicates "bioterrorism" and specifically mentions the "...Nazi scientists who were working on a variety

of biological weapons in their laboratories...”). The story also attempts to respond to media coverage of Ebola, noting and commenting on what it sees as the media’s disregard for African life (“Fast-forward to 2014. For the first time in history a Filovirus has reached American soil and the headlines are global. Thousands died in West Africa but that didn’t make as much noise in the media...I wonder why.”). The author then expands on his conspiracy theory, now implicating neoliberal capitalism by noting that, after the first reported case of Ebola in the USA, “Out of the blue, a cluster of pharmaceutical companies who have been ‘working on’ the virus for years have discovered ‘experimental’ treatments to curb its spread.” Bringing his conspiracy theory in line with his inference about the disregard for African lives, the author further notes that: “These treatments are available to the Liberian man in America. They are however not available to the Liberian victims in Liberia.” Following this, the author then turns his attention to South Africa espousing what the author deems to be “some facts” about Ebola and the South African situation:

As much as viruses need people to spread; people need transport systems to spread viruses. 1st world transport infrastructure is, well, 1st class! The roads are generally functional, the planes work well and the buses reach their destination. The capacity for rapid spread of a contagious virus like Ebola within a first world country is potentially more rapid than in Africa. Our roads are faulty and our bridges are collapsing. Our buses are breaking down and for Ebola to spread from its focal point in West Africa is surprisingly, difficult. Infrastructure problems in Africa are actually assisting its containment.

(Tawenga, 2014, <http://www.news24.com/MyNews24/Ebola-How-Does-It-Affect-Us-20141104>)

Having delivered his assessment of the “African condition”, the author then states emphatically that this is “... NOT a West African problem alone anymore. It is a virus that has world-changing potential.” He concludes this section of his article by lamenting the fact that: “Unfortunately for all human beings everywhere; these things are first handled by the politicians before the people with actual skills get ahold of the matter.” Surprisingly, given the popularity of conspiracy theories in terms of “newsworthiness” within the citizen journalism sphere, this article has a relatively low view count (365 views at the time of writing) and also attracted only four comments, one of which accuses the author of trying to “... cook up a conspiracy theory” through omission of facts, and one of which praises the author’s “brilliance”. The remaining two comments were nonsensical. In contrast, the other two stories explicating the virus attracting more comments, with all 13 comments attracted by “EVD, Africa’s leading fatality” focusing on the misrepresentation of medical and “leading cause of death” facts by the author; four of the comments were authored by the same individual.

In terms of socio-political commentary, the first comment on this article is especially noteworthy, with the commentator calling out the author's poor choice of words:

Arthur Harding – August 13, 2014 at 10:13

“Two patients in South Africa, suspected of containing the virus were tested of EVD and have been cleared of all suspicion.” You make it sound like catching a disease is a criminal offence.

This is an astute observation, for, as has been noted by Foucault and Crewe (1992), such “criminalization” of disease serves a psychologically reassuring role. Being able to blame others is psychologically reassuring: the fact that it is their fault divides us from them. We are innocent, at the mercy of fate; they are guilty, and have behaved in such a way as to put us all at risk (Crewe, 1992, p. 14). This, it is argued, functions to give concrete form to the desire to create boundaries between the diseased and the clean, which in turn structures public opinion of both disease and those living with disease.

Attempting to historicize this reaction, Crewe (1992, p. 17) writes that:

Throughout history, the dominant sector of society has held socially marginalized groups, ethnic minorities and the poor responsible for epidemic diseases. Jews were blamed for the Black Death in Europe, the Irish were blamed for cholera in New York and the Italians were accused of introducing polio into Brooklyn. Foreigners were blamed for syphilis – the French called it the Italian disease, while the Italians called it the Spanish disease.

Drawing heavily on Foucault, Crewe sees the resultant moves towards isolation and quarantine for the afflicted as ways of expressing public fears about outsiders or socially unacceptable groups. Evidence that this “fear about outsiders” still functions in the consciousness of even groups traditionally at the receiving end of such fear-mongering are ample in the Western and commercial media coverage of Ebola, as well as in some government responses to the disease. It functions in the decisions by governments to close their borders as well as in the calls by citizens for a closer monitoring of borders, including screening people coming into countries, as evidenced in some stories and comments in the citizen journalism space:

Steve Price – April 6, 2014 at 11:59

The SA authorities were so worried about Swine Flu and Bird Flu that they took steps at our international borders to monitor people entering the country.

I think the way this virus has the potential to spread through our somewhat porous international borders with our neighbours is far more scary.  
(Commenting on the “Ebola Outbreak – The Scary Truth” story)

The article entitled “SA at risk from Ebola?” similarly notes that “South Africa could be declared an Ebola hotspot in the not too distant future...”; stating as support for the assertion (and amongst other assertions that: “With borders more porous than Swiss Cheese, it’s only a matter of time before the killer virus migrates to this backend of Africa. It’s almost as if there are no border controls in place with people coming and going as they please.”

The majority of stories and comments in this space, however, advocate for tolerance, education and understanding about Ebola, while calling out stories and comments that are geared towards “fear-mongering”, “conspiracy theories” and blaming people affected by the disease. The story headlined “Ebola Outbreak Exposes Lack of Cooperation and Solidarity among African Nations”, for example, advocates for better understanding among African nations and doing away with “...artificially colonial-demarcated boundaries. Issues regarding Africa should not be seen as superiority contest or an avenue for grandstanding but a collective issue that demand collective action.” Similarly, the article headlined “Why I Love West Africa – Minus Ebola” argues for doing away with misconceptions about (West) Africa and making an effort to understand our African brothers and sisters. Commentaries on stories also picked up on the theme of understanding the disease and African solidarity:

konfab – January 20, 2015 at 06:33

Typical middle class fear. You are more likely to die of TB or Malaria. Ebola is only spread through contact with bodily fluids. The only people who get Ebola are those who directly handle people with Ebola.

(Comment on a story about Ebola insurance coverage for South Africans)

The vast majority of comments on the MyNews24 website were, however, reserved to (1) question African governance; and (2) question the maxim “African solutions for African problems”. In this respect, the stories and the commentaries clearly illustrate – similar to the Zimbabwean case study – that while citizen journalists can and do respond to news stories of national and international importance, they do so on their own terms. Not surprisingly perhaps, what seems to be non-negotiable for southern African citizen journalists is a focus on issues that directly impact upon the everyday – that is, there is a clear focus on calling African governments to do better. This call is markedly different from Western media calls in this respect though, as it primarily discards and even mocks coverage that seems to suggest that African

citizens cannot think for themselves, and while they may be attracted to so-called conspiracy theories – even indulging in espousing such theories from time to time – it is clear that such indulgence is rooted in a desire to reposition the African continent and its place in global socio-politics.

## Conclusion

The critical responses to digital media coverage of the 2014 Ebola crisis should be considered in the context of democratization within the two transitional societies. Leslie (2007) reminds us that communication online tends to be driven by crisis, “but when circumstances are normal, exchanges of information with different objectives prevail” (p. 124). Responses from African citizen journalism to the 2014 Ebola crisis illustrates the behaviour of new-generation Africans who want to tackle challenges without hypocrisy, corruption, inefficiency, ineptitude, incompetence or buffoonery. The online users see through the double standards of their leaders (Ayithey, 2005). The responses to the 2014 Ebola crisis can ultimately be seen as a way in which African officialdom and blogspheres are in contest. This can only deepen democratization.

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