



NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

**“THE APPROPRIATION OF ONLINE MEDIA PLATFORMS AS ALTERNATIVE
PUBLIC SPHERES FOR EFFECTIVE CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL
GOVERNANCE: A CASE STUDY OF THE BULAWAYO PROGRESSIVE
RESIDENTS ASSOCIATION (BPRA)”**

**Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement of the Bsc Degree in
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ABSTRACT

This study focused on the Bulawayo Progressive Residents' Association (BPRA), a resident's association in Zimbabwe's second largest city, as a specimen of how civil institutions are making use of ICTs to facilitate dialogue among residents on issues of local governance and service delivery.

The main intentions for carrying out this investigation were to uncover how BPRA is using online platforms to engage residents and how residents are in turn using these platforms to participate in local democratic processes. It also aimed to find out to what extent BPRA's platforms have extended its offline advocacy work to the virtual spheres, thereby creating a virtual public sphere in the mould of Habermas' (1962) public sphere concept. Furthermore, the study investigated whether residents found these online platforms better than traditional platforms in facilitating their debates and representing their views.

The study was guided by Jurgen Habermas' public sphere theory and theories that challenge its effectiveness like the alternative public sphere and virtual public sphere theories. It also focused on the agenda setting theory as conceptualising the means by which various media platforms allow users to set the agenda.

The study took a mixed method approach, applying online ethnography and case study approaches. Content analysis of BPRA's Facebook and Blog site postings, focus group interviews, one on one in-depth interviews and in-depth telephone interviews were used to uncover whether BPRA's online platforms have indeed become an alternative for existing traditional media platforms.

In its findings, the study concludes that alternative media platforms are a necessity for participatory democracy. It also found that despite their limitations, BPRA's online media