

Nov 04, 2016 by [Sharon Hudson-Dean](#)

The Facebook Ambassador ^[1]

Facebook is Zimbabwe's top website. According to Google, Facebook was the most popular web search term among Zimbabweans in 2011, replacing "Zimbabwe," which led the list in 2010 and 2009. The Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation's (ZBC) Power FM, despite its antiquated broadcasting studios, fills its popular music programming with trendy young DJs enthusiastically pushing listeners to follow them on the social networking site while quoting recent FB comments.

Tellingly, the new year of 2012 kicked off with South African pop star DJ Cleo's "Facebook" song at the top of the Zim charts. A catchy English-Zulu dance tune, the trendy pop song makes it clear that hip, worldly young people no longer bother with trading phone numbers: "Don't take my number or give me yours - let's meet on Facebook..." ZBC's monopoly of the airwaves guarantees that rural and high-density suburban youth hear this song multiple times each day. Along with a cell phone and an English Premier League football jersey (for boys) or a good quality hair weave or extensions (for girls), the personal Facebook page is now an essential element of teenage Zimbabwean life for all social classes.

As a prime media tool for a younger-than-ever, interconnected world audience, Facebook is now *de rigueur* in U.S. foreign policy. Shortly after taking office in 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton appointed a Special Advisor for Innovation to act as internal cheerleader and external PR man in pushing the use of technology and social media at America's oldest executive branch department. Social media best practice presentations are now a key part of mandatory training courses for senior officers. My current ambassador, Charles Ray, is one of the most active senior career diplomats personally using social media to cross the line between traditional foreign policy and social networking.

Ray is an online "junkie." At age 67, with 30 years working for the State Department following a 20 year army career, his early morning reveille is spent online, as are his late nights after formal diplomatic dinners. "I have two computers running right next to each other and I continually go back and forth. One might have the current chapter of my new crime novel up, while the other is a blog on the worst airports in the world. And the whole time, I'll be checking my Facebook page and weighing in on a discussion about young people being pushed aside in Zimbabwean politics," says the gray-haired African-American from Texas, with a gap-toothed grin and penchant for navy-blue safari suits. "Zimbabweans love my page. They love the fact that they can say whatever they want, and I'll respond eventually. No Zimbabwean politician or civic leader does that. A few of them are on Facebook, but they don't engage. My page is a platform and I've already maxed out my limit of friend membership."

Until he hit his limit, Ray accepted all friend requests, even those he knew or suspected were from ZANU-PF intelligence agents or anti-West media commentators. His posts—which cover topics as varied as how to self-publish online to famous quotes about freedom and the latest Embassy agricultural outreach event—frequently get over 50 comments and create passionate debates among his followers. The Ambassador allows anti-American comments,

providing they are polite and logical. He is quick to attack the irrational propaganda narrative, especially when he sees hypocrisy and false history in it. On May 25, 2012, the Ambassador posted a call for peace in Africa in honor of Africa Day. The posting generated 49 “likes” and 34 comments including this exchange:

Charles Ray: *On this, Africa Day, wishing for peace and prosperity throughout the continent - the cradle of humanity.*

Gloria Nyamagodo: Very true sir god bless u sir!!

Mkuhlani Jackbauer David: Thank u ambassador but may u send the peace call to your friends in europe to stop sponsoring african conflicts inorder to plunder resourses

Charles Ray: It would also be helpful if Africans would quit participating in such conflicts (a matter of making choices here), and if some would stop plundering their own resources. Sometimes the solution is close to home.

Shishma Shymyeyey Jindwi: Mkuhlani Jackbauer, I think you have gone too far with your tirade! This is just a peace call by the Ambassador on this African day!

Martha Tholanah: Thank you, Ambassador. Thank you also for the inspiring message to us at the GlobalPOWER Women Africa Network Summit.

Mkuhlani Jackbauer David: Martha if only u and i were privy to what the european diplomats told the visiting un human rights commissioner u would understand their double starndands and insincerity

Martha Tholanah: I was there, David. I heard facts, not fiction.

Mkuhlani Jackbauer David: I dont have enemies guys peace calls must be put into context

Abel Dzobo: Leave America alone. Its an African problem. Francophone, Anglophone. that's division. Arabs and blacks. division. Christians and Moslems. Divisions. AU fails to unite all African countries because of these differences. who is the supernation? economically thats South Africa, and soon Angola, the DRC has to stop fighting first. Politically its Zimbabwe etc etc. its a fragmented continent.

Takemore Majabule: Thank you ambasador for the call, wish and desire for peace, the cradle of humanity. You are such an icon of reconcilliation, unity, peace and hope. You know your job.

The degree to which Ambassador Ray personally engages with his “friends” and his

consistent presence online each day makes him unique among public figures in Zimbabwe. A few politicians on both sides of the political divide have Facebook pages but neither update them daily nor use them as platforms for engaging their constituents; the same can be said for pop culture figures and media houses. The market is surging ahead, leaving a wide open space ready to be claimed by a social media savvy public figure like Ray.

The Zimbabwean social media field is still relatively sparsely populated but change is coming and coming fast. In his 2012 budget speech, Finance Minister Tendai Biti noted that the “Information Communication Technology (ICT) sector remains one of the fastest growing sectors of the economy.... Concurrently, the voice penetration rate or tele-density has improved, reaching 68% in 2011, of which mobile penetration accounted for 65%, making Zimbabwe one of the countries with the highest rates alongside South Africa, Botswana, and Mozambique.” He went on to confirm that the three main mobile service providers now have 8.1 million subscribers. What the Minister failed to highlight is that by the end of 2011, all three GSM mobile service providers had affordable mobile broadband data packages available to their subscribers, opening the internet to two thirds of the population.

Even ZANU-PF recently published its official intention to adopt the internet and social media as a new party outreach platform. The party’s 12th National People’s Conference, held in December 2011, published a Central Committee Report that reads in part: “No matter how much depth and convincing information for public consumption the Party presents, if vehicles or platforms for disseminating that information are not in sync with modern trends, the Party would remain wondering why it is not striking a political chord with the majority of the electorate who are in the 18-40 age group.”

While others debate how and when to enter the social media sphere in Zimbabwe, the White House announced the nomination of Ambassador Ray’s successor, due here later this year. Ray’s Facebook page has been filled with comments from “friends” – comments that demonstrate his lasting impact through the social media site. One follower had this to say on May 16:

Rememberance Shumba So sad to have learnt that you are finishing your Zimbabwean tour this year, Zimbabwe has never had an American Ambassador who is so engaged with Locals as you have been Ambassador Charles Ray, hopefully the new Ambassador coming in would work on fostering relationships like you have been doing, may the High One give you Peace in all your dealings.
