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The use of Facebook for political commentary in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The use of the Internet, and especially social media networks, is becoming increasingly relevant for 21st century politics, not only for political campaigning purposes, but also as a platform to encourage the public to engage in political discourse. This study considers comments posted on two South African political party Facebook sites: the African National Congress' (ANC); and the Democratic Alliance's (DA). It examines how both the South African public and the political parties are using the site for discussion, debate and opinion formation. The study also investigates the perceived benefits and challenges that are offered to members of the Facebook groups. According to the findings, the public are using the Facebook site(s) to engage in discussion of a political nature as well as using the platform to connect with each other and share political information in new ways. However, it is this article's contention that the two political parties are not fully capitalising on the potential offered by Facebook.

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1. Introduction

New media technology, such as the Internet has received much attention due to its capacity to integrate content production and consumption capabilities, expanding the communication opportunities offered to the public, previously hampered by geography, time, physical and social boundaries (Flew, 2005; Stafford and Faber, 2005; Van Dijk, 2006). With the advent of social networking sites, such as Facebook, affordable information dissemination and retrieval has been made possible, which is the key to the better functioning of the public sphere (Bentivegna, 2002). Such changes have brought new opportunities for citizens to engage, discuss and debate in the political realm. If used correctly, social media networks could have a positive impact, or influence, on the relationship between political parties and the public (Crompton, 2008; Wills and Reeves, 2007; Zittel, 2007). This paper considers the nature of political commentary and participation on two South African political parties' sites on one of the more popular online social networks, Facebook, by examining the following four theoretical assumptions:

1. In its role as a participatory tool, Facebook acts as an additional channel for political communication outside of traditional media.
2. Facebook offers new ways of reaching individuals and targeting specific audiences.
3. A political party's Facebook site facilitates political interaction and participation by making two-way communication possible.
4. Facebook allows for increased public opinion and political participation.

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The paper concentrates on the comments posted on the two most prominent South African political party Facebook sites, the African National Congress (ANC) and Democratic Alliance (DA), from 14 to 21 June 2010. Of these, the majority party is the ANC, which gained 65% of the national vote in the 2009 South African general elections. The DA is the main opposition party and they gained 16% of the national vote (Independent Electoral Commission, 2009; African National Congress, 2010; Democratic Alliance, 2010). Both the ANC and DA Facebook sites have regular activity and increasing membership. The relevant sites may be viewed at www.facebook.com/myancsouthafrica and www.facebook.com/democraticalliance respectively. Although seemingly brief, the period 14–21 June 2010 was selected as it was socially, culturally and politically significant. It included Youth Day on 16 June, which is a prominent public holiday commemorating the struggle for scholastic equality in South Africa (South African Government Information, 2010), and in 2010, this week had special impetus due to the 2010 FIFA World Cup South Africa, which also had political ramifications for the country due to nation-building rhetoric that had preceded and continued throughout the event. This event put additional international focus on South Africa and influenced how political parties organised their activities. This brief time frame was also useful as it allowed the researchers to use the trends found in the study to discuss broader issues with the parties as to how they themselves viewed the benefits and challenges of establishing and maintaining the sites, and how they chose to respond to the public about these two politically pertinent events.

From the comments posted and the interviews held with party officials, it became apparent that while the public were actively engaging with other members about relevant political issues linked to the aforementioned events, the parties themselves were not. Officials indicated that the sites existed more as a means of disseminating information and of monitoring public opinion (rather than as a means of interacting with them) and so they appeared to treat it in a similar manner as to traditional media. In this way, the study contributes to existing literature on the continent (see Nyabuga and Mudhai, 2009, and Moyo, 2009) by bridging the gap between more normative ideologies associated with the revitalised public realm, and the realities of online political commentary and participation in South Africa.

2. Literature

2.1. Facebook and the potential for political participation

The term social media is used to describe online tools and utilities that allow communication of information, participation and collaboration. It is established on a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content (UGC) (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Mayfield, 2008; Newson et al., 2009). This means that it is a platform that facilitates information sharing and participation from users of the media in order to create and/or distribute the content. Examples of social media include blogs, web forums, instant chat, and social networking platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and MySpace. Such media offers its audience the ability to form an online community as it is interactive and enables conversation, which makes it possible for people to gather online, share information, knowledge and opinions (Jensen, 1998; Safko and Brake, 2009). The use of social networking sites as a participatory tool has provided a channel for members of the public to engage politically with each other and their government, and these sites are a growing force in the study of civic engagement and participation (Carpentier, 2007; Polat, 2005; Vitak et al., 2009). It is important to note that political participation involves more than accessing information or expressing individual views, the opportunity for deliberation must also exist (Polat, 2005). The creation of informed opinion is what is most important to endure thriving and robust government systems. In this case, public opinion can refer to affairs of the state, issues open and accessible to everyone, issues of common concern as well as the public good, as opposed to private interests (Communications for Governance and Accountability Program, n.d.). Public opinion is formed through a process of collective expression of views and decision making. The interactive public sphere established through the use of social networks enables citizen opinions and ideas to be exchanged. In this way social networks represent an expansion of the space within which expressions of unity, diversity and difference innate to vibrant political life can be communicated. Social media can act as communicative institutions, as sources and foci of society's shared experience (McNair, 2007), as well as acting as the foundation through which discussion and opinion flows, in ways that can achieve and sustain common and collective political discourse and action (Lax, 2000; Lister et al., 2003; Shah et al., 2007).

Within the scope of online social media, Facebook serves as an indication of the phenomenal growth of social network sites in recent years (Kushin and Kitchener, 2009). South Africa is ranked at 31 on the global scale of Facebook users (Socialbakers, 2012), and is ranked at 2 in Africa, just behind Egypt (OAfrica, 2010). Facebook is the second most popular social media network in South Africa – eclipsed only by MXit, a locally designed mobile/cellular phone network. Currently, in 2012, MXit has approximately 10 million users (Vermeulen, 2012), as opposed to the 5 365 460 Facebook users (Socialbakers, 2012). From these statistics, it appears that only 10% of the population are online, raising concerns around access. However, it is interesting to note that of those who do have access to online information, 101.24% have Facebook accounts (Socialbakers, 2012). Of course, at the time of this study (2010), Facebook had slightly fewer users, although it was still the second most used social network. In 2010, there were 3 187 180 users, which accounted for 6.5% of the total population and 60% of all local Internet users (OAfrica, 2010). Thus, the appeal of using a social network site such as Facebook for political purposes by political parties is that it has an existing large user base and it can be used to target sections of the

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