

[DOI: 10.20472/IAC.2017.031.018](https://doi.org/10.20472/IAC.2017.031.018)

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NEW MEDIA AND POLITICS: AN ASSESSMENT OF 2016 SOUTH AFRICAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

Abstract:

In recent times, the role of media in politics has increased significantly. With the inception of the new form of media communication, the interaction between the importance of media and politicization remain complementary. During the 2016 South African Local Government Elections, the new media featured as one of the prominent medium of political interaction between various political stakeholders across the country. This paper argues that the role of new media facilitated political interaction across the political terrain of the country during the election. It also argues that political actors increased their use of new media not only to advance their political ideas but also to receive feedbacks from the electorates. Therefore, this paper identifies that the new media created an interactive forum linking the political parties, Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) and the electorates. In other words, this medium increased existing interaction within the South African political environment particularly during the just concluded 2016 Local Government Elections.

Keywords:

Local Government Elections, new media, politics, South Africa

Introduction

The importance of media in electioneering has not been in contention globally. However, with the advent of new media such as Facebook, twitter, weblog, WhatsApp and many more, political communication and interaction appears to have increased significantly. In the light of this development, political parties in South Africa tend to embrace this medium of communication to intensify their political activities, expand political interaction, interchange ideas and increase awareness. Not entirely discarding the significance of face-to-face campaigns, the role of technological developments on political communication remains a vital aspect of the conduct of politics. This is so because communicating through the new media is easier, direct, instantaneous, cheap and mostly effective. Hence, it possesses insidious potentialities capable of adapting the nature of political interaction, communication and participation particularly in South Africa.

Background

The increasing fundamentality of new media in politics contemporarily continues to play vital role as an influencing factor in increasing politicisation in South African politics. South African political history is divided into two; politics of repression under apartheid, which ended in 1994 and the present democracy. From this period on, transition of power assumed a more democratic and all inclusive political process, which provided enfranchisement to all eligible adults to vote and be voted for in an election. Before 1994, the apartheid government suppressed media and journalism. It enacted and enforced laws preventing black political parties across the country from making use of the media to report their political activities. The government had more than 100 laws clamping down and censoring media reports from the black political parties (Louw, 2014). However, the removal of banning on media at the dawn of democracy in 1994 implies that the media can now report on the political activities of political parties particularly of the African National Congress (ANC) without hindrance (ibid). As a matter of fact, the radio, television, newspapers, billboards, banners and public address systems were all prominent mediums of political electioneering and communication available in the country at the time. These medium of communication are contemporarily viewed as the old media.

Research methodology

This study looks into the role new media in South African 2016 local government election. The study is a desktop research evaluating existing relevant literature studies in understanding new media impact in a political campaigning and engagement with the voters through an Internet browse. Mandari and Koloseni (2016) believed that a desktop study could be carried out via browsing Internet. New media is increasingly becoming a life-line among South African population including young and old. The study involved analysis of different social media account of top three (3) political parties in South Africa, which are African National Congress (ANC), Democratic Alliance (DA) and Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). These three was chosen due mostly to their heavy presence and followership on Facebook and Twitter particularly during the 2016 local government election period.

Literature review

New media (social media)

The use of Internet and its tools have facilitated dissemination of information globally in the 21st century. The wider Internet penetration have seen social media speedy growth in the past few years (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). Social media are new media, information, communication and technology using communication components to link people (Auvinen, 2012). Nowadays, social media has open doors for social dialogue and discussion of overlooked issues in the society (Shabir, Hameed, Safdar & Gilani, 2014; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). As a result of this platform many of these issues are given attention in politics, economies, education, health and many more. According to Auvinen (2012), the advent of social media has redefined the way society share information and communicate. The redefinition are felt across government organisation and agencies, young and old people, they all have adopted social media to express their views and ideas to bridge “digital gap”. According to Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan (2013), the social media process has reinvest how people interact, communicate, co-ordinate and organise individuals and group of people with similar ideas. This was made real on 2014 research report indication that 62% of Internet and web users gets their political events and news through Facebook (Udoka, 2015).

Based on the wider spread and penetration of social media, the growing number on political events, political stakeholders (politicians, electorates, political parts, and electorate commissions) have shown the role of social media in political mobilisation (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). The penetration of the new media (social media) for political mobilisation were heavily felt during the 2011 Arab Spring as well as Iran and Moldova revolution (Storck, 2011). The Barack Obama election in 2008, 2001 Philippines street rallies, “Occupy Wall Street” movement in 2011 and many more all got wider publicity because of social media (Auvinen, 2012). Also, Finnish 2011 election, the elections in Berlin, French 2011 presidential election (Auvinen, 2012), Nigeria 2015 presidential election, Brexit were all largely impact by social media influence, which enabled voters to share ideas, contents (images and videos) via this platform. The South African 2016 local government election, 2016 United States of America presidential election debates and many other campaign movements around the globe were all fuelled by one thing, the new media.

These events have begun a debate on the role of social media on political mobilisation. Nonetheless, academics, political group (parties), journalist have welcomed the social media as good tool for political electioneering (Storck, 2011). This revolutionary change brought by social media is currently playing an important role in the ongoing 2016 #ThisFlag movement in Zimbabwe. The uprisings across North Africa, Middle East in 2011, #ThisFlag movement, election campaigns and processes and other ongoing social media campaign simplified the role of New Media (social media) in our society. This new media have witness increased growth that people use Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and personal blogs than traditional media platform like newspapers, magazines and television broadcasts.

Many that engage in these new media use them as an alternative press news corner, “organisational tool, citizen journalism” and platform for creating awareness locally and internationally (Storck, 2011). The new media have established “flat world” communication forum and uniting many into one “global village”. However, the extent social media made possible “global village” was predicated by “communication theorist Marshall McLuhan in 1960s” and

“essayist Thomas L. Friedman” believed that 21st century will create “flat world” communication system (Auvinen, 2012).

In line with the benefits and roles of social media, many of South African population have adopted the use of these media as seen in 2016 local government election where political parties, Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) engage with voters using social media. Example, Table 1 outlined Facebook likes and Twitter followers of the three major political parties in South Africa before and after the 2016 election. Table 1 was updated on the 11th November, 2016 which shows massive followership of these parties online. The last column (people talking about the parties) on the table implies that many people in their thousands are busy engaging and talking about these political parties daily on different topics and issues.

Table 1. Massive followership of these parties online

Political parties	Social media	Before election	After election	People talking about the parties
African National Congress (ANC)	Facebook	338 803	392,695	8,611
	Twitter	304 000	328,724	Not found
Democratic Alliance (DA)	Facebook	339 943	419,227	167,643
	Twitter	216 000	243,402	Not found
Economic Freedom Fighter (EFF)	Facebook	160 779	189,014	8,128
	Twitter	151 000	179,961	Not found

Source: Mekuto (2016)

ROi Media recorded that the top influencers during the week of the election were: Julius Malema leader of EFF who recorded 10, 92% and 16.02% of media coverage, ANC and Jacob Zuma had 3,84% and 7.53% of media coverage while Mmusi Maimane and DA recorded only 12.7% media coverage and 2,13% of the social media positive and negative conversations (<http://flume.co.za/elections-south-africans-social-media/> and <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/politics-dominates-sa-news-and-social-media-20160807>). While the trending topics and hashtags during the period includes #2016MunicipalElections, #Votelocal2016, #NelsonMandelaBay, #MediaFreedom, #Unemployment, #Election2016 and the top influencers in the election among the political leaders and account @My_ANC, @Julius_S_Malema, @helenzille, @Our_DA (<http://www.gadget.co.za/sa-social-media-votes-different/>). The trending topics and issues discussed during the election season is an indication on the massive role new media played in 2016 local government election.

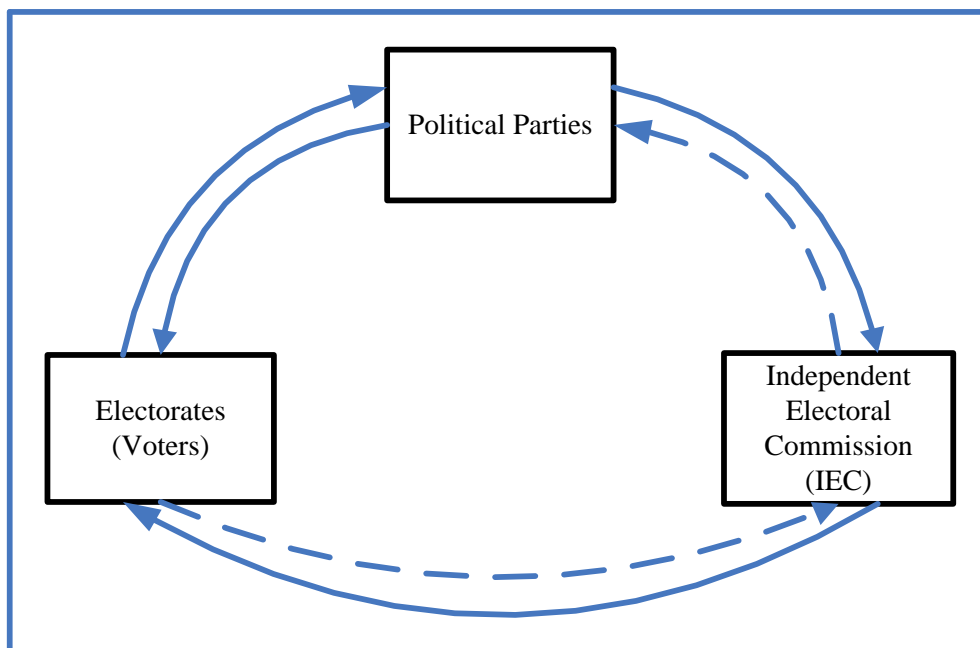
All these findings indicates the penetration and impact of social media during the SA 2016 local government election. It also shows that SA political leaders and class are involving more on social media in order to engage and connect with their supporters. It is also realised that general public are now engaging more in social media conversations and busy connecting with their political

parties. Table 1 also present the fact that citizens are massively engaging with political party of choice in gaining access to instance events, news-line, programmes and many more.

In other occasion, IEC have managed to utilise social media to disseminate information to electorate in many ways. It's was also found out that political parties have established their virtual presence and footprint in using social media to converse for vote and connect with voters. General public, government agents, anti-government, journalist and others have also realised that social media can be used to engineer revolution in the society. All these positive and negative impacts associated with social media never exist many years ago. From the findings, Figure 1 revealed the roles and interaction which have played out among political parties, electorates (voters) and IEC using social media during elections

The connecting line with arrow shows the strong flow of information among the stakeholders while the dotted line with arrow expresses interaction but not in an advanced stage. The overall indication proves that each of institutions have strong footprint on social media and it was directly and indirectly used by this stakeholders very well during the 2016 local government election. Nonetheless, the indication after the 2016 local elections shows that each of the political parties have active Facebook and Twitter account. They memberships and followership's keep growing and different kinds of discussions are taking place.

Figure 1: The interactive flow role of New Media in 2016 SA Local Elections



Local government election

In 1994, South Africa democratic election doors were opened followed by 1999 election (Mattes & Southhall, 2004) after many years of apartheid government system (white dominance rule system). The democratic system of government in South Africa allow for voter to vote after every five years and voting political parties (Mattes & Southhall, 2004) than individual politicians in the parliament. The election process in South Africa is organised and monitored by Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) as founded 1997 and is regarded as most trusted institution in South

Africa (Schulz-Herzenberg, 2014). A 2015 report by Afrobarometer shows that many South Africans still trust and have confidence in their electoral system in place in conducting free and fair elections without crisis (Nkomo & Felton, 2016). According to Mattes and Southhall (2004), the parliament is made up of political parties leaders and top individuals, the national parliament or the provincial assembly depend on how each political parties accumulates votes. The five years electoral voting system in South Africa involves national and local government election. South African system of government is broken down into national, provincial and municipalities levels. Municipalities system provides services to individuals, households, societies and communities at local level and helping them to understand how government works (Roefs & Atkinson, 2010). Ideally, the municipalities should be able to provide basic services to citizens without difficulties as highlighted in Batho Pele (People First). Batho Pele was first introduced in 1997 by the Public Service and Administration with eight important principles which are: service standard, consultation, information, access, openness and transparency, courtesy, value for money and redress if services are not provided (Roefs & Atkinson, 2010). These principles promote to ensure that government services and development are taken directly to the citizens households across the country. For government to achieve its service-delivery at the local level, citizens are given the chance every five years to elect their representatives through the ballot (municipal elections).

Municipal elections is enshrined in 1998 Local Government White Paper with the aim that electorates are provided services through their representations (councillors), informed and educated voters to register, and vote with safety in mind. Electorates are also informed on their wards and municipal structures and many other electoral rules (Roefs & Atkinson, 2010). From the inception of local government elections, ANC have been the dominating political party (Nkomo & Felton, 2016) but gradually declining at every election year. The decline in electoral participations and turnout of voters is noted on Table 2 is because of dissatisfaction on the level of work done by councillors (Nkomo & Felton, 2016). Though, the 2016 local government election was most talked about since 1994 election. In 2016 government election, ANC recorded their worst performance ever with an increased growth for other political parties like DA, EFF and many more.

The dynamic performance and voter turnout from 1995 to 2016 across all the province can rest on many questions: Are voters disappointed on their municipal representative's performance after elections? Have voters lost confidence in the IEC? Do they still believe in the electoral processes? Are the political parties providing services to locals after the elections? These questions can be attributed to the declining percentage rate of voters over the years as shown on Table 2. However, the 2011 statistics is not available (N/A).

Table 2. Local government electoral participations

Province	*1995	*2000	*2006	2011	**2016
Western Cape	60%	58%	52%	N/A	63%
Northern Cape	65%	58%	54%	N/A	61%

Eastern Cape	55%	56%	56%	N/A	56%
North West	45%	45%	46%	N/A	54%
Free State	53%	49%	47%	N/A	56%
Gauteng	49%	43%	43%	N/A	58%
Northern Province/Limpopo	46%	43%	45%	N/A	50%
Mpumalanga	53%	45%	46%	N/A	56%
KwaZulu-Natal	46%	47%	51%	N/A	61%

Source: Roefs and Atkinson (2010)*,
http://www.saweb.co.za/2016elections/2016elections.asp** .

The overall outlook on Table 2 proves that local government electoral participation in South Africa is under heavy threats between 1995 and 2016 local government elections. But the participation increased a little bit in 2016 municipal elections, the growth can be attributed to the involvement of new media. Although, there was some challenges in the 1995 in a place like KwaZulu-Natal due to lack in media courage to generate needed voters awareness, low voter's turnout was recorded resulting from lack of interest (Roefs & Atkinson, 2010). Some of these problems also formed part of the challenges of the 2000 elections notwithstanding some improvements it recorded.

Nonetheless, the turnout of youths is not encouraging and often local elections participations among ruling party supporters is low (Roefs & Atkinson, 2010; Nkomo & Felton, 2016). According to Roefs and Atkinson (2010), the overall turnout among Africans compared with white and coloured is low. They have a continuous decline since 1994 in electoral participation, ideally, this can be caused by less effect of democracy in South Africa (Schulz-Herzenberg, 2014) and dissatisfaction with government at the local level (Southall, 2014).

The decline can also be attributed on lack of government engagement with the voters or citizenry after elections. But 2016 voters' turn-up is encouraging (see Table 2). Although, more is still to be done. But the game charger lies on how government engage with the citizenry pre and post-elections and service level delivered to the masses. Increasing the growth and political participations among citizenry also means that effective and efficient usage of new media should be given needed attention and investment.

Conclusions and recommendations

South African electoral representation and participation has come a long way and challenges are growing in many. This study proves a shift on focus and mandate of municipalities in meeting the citizens' expectations. Voters are not carried along in the municipal decision processes and they are not aware nor communicated on the government plans, programs, events and many others. These challenges can be resolved through the use of new media technology in connecting the

youth and old into election process. The new media is continuously connecting millions of people on daily basis in South Africa especially the youths. It means then that municipal representatives and officers should increase their utilisation of these new forms of media communication to carry along and integrate the voters. Citizenry should be educated on how to engage with government events using this new media.

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