

Social media as an effective communication tool for youth engagement on social political issues: A case study of the affirmative repositioning movement in Namibia

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Abstract

This study assesses the impact of social media as an effective communication tool in mobilizing youth engagement in socio-political matters that affect them. This form of communication engagement has brought a paradigm change to the communication process in Namibia. Using a qualitative method in the form of a case study, the researchers focused on Namibia's socio-political movement, the Affirmative Repositioning Movement (ARM) to predict the impact of its use of social media, particularly Facebook, in engaging its followers.

Keywords

Affirmative Repositioning Movement, social media, netizens, social movement, mass mobilization

Introduction

Affirmative Repositioning Movement (ARM) is a youth driven movement which has put immense pressure on the Government of Namibia to make access to land to the Namibian youth imperative. It was established in 2014 with the aim of mobilizing Namibian youth to demand access to urban land. In November 2014, ARM used social media to mobilize over 51, 000 landless Namibian youth to submit mass application for land. This was coordinated among 14 political regions of Namibia and the numbers of applicants caught the local authorities by surprise. Facebook was the social media platform that was extensively

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used by ARM to achieve its objectives. The recent advances in communication technology such as Web 2.0 and especially the participative social media internet, has had dramatic impact in transforming the patterns of communication (Fox & Jones, 2009). Social media, in particular, has increased both connectivity and participation in all spheres of social life, transforming what was previously known as audience to netizens which is defined as the citizen of the net (Luoma-aho, 2010). This transformation has been observed in Namibia where the number of people using internet daily has risen from 16 percent in November 2012 to 39 percent in September 2014 (Stoman & Stoman, 2014). This study shows a paradigm change social media has brought to the communication process in Namibia and in particular its power as a communication tool for youth participation in matters that affect their lives. The Affirmative Repositioning Movement (ARM) was the unit of analysis to predict the impact of social media in Namibia.

The ARM leadership embarked on a mass mobilization of the Namibian youth to apply for land (Immanuel, 2015) through which it coerced government into action in favor of its demands. ARM used Facebook to mobilize the Namibian youth to apply for land in all fourteen political regions of the country, hence the focus on this social media platform to measure its impact. According to (Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick, Mayer, & Johnston, 2009) Facebook is a social utility that helps people to communicate more efficiently with their friends, family and co-workers by facilitating the sharing of information and political beliefs.

Impact of social media

Luoma-aho (2010: 3) defines social media as “writing and broadcasting carried out by the people formally known as the audience.” This change from audience to creators of information, signals a huge transformation in the communication media because information users and receivers have become information generators (Ngai, Tao & Moon, 2014). This conclusion is supported by Kaplan & Haenlein (2010: 61) who also agrees with O’Reilly (2007) defines social media as “a group of internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundation of Web 2.0 and allow the creation and exchange of user generated content”. The former audience, who are now the generators of information, can use social media to create, share and exchange information in a virtual community. The digital revolution as Levick (2012) suggests, has changed several aspects of society including democracy and the way human beings react to certain situations to which Miller (2011) concurs and argues

further that the impact, in the case of Facebook, on humanity is immense. In Namibia, the IPPR (2014) confirms the increasing use of information technology during elections and posits that it is now positioned to facilitate communication between governments and its citizens.

The advantage of this constant virtual connection and sharing of information, ideas and opinions helps to display a collective opinion that has not been experienced before in the traditional media, a conclusion that is supported by Holmes, Hadwin & Mottershead, (2013), Ngai, Tao & Moon (2014). The later catalogue the impact and changes brought by the social media to which Tang, Gu & Whinston (2012) agrees. Improvement in technology has made it feasible to access the Internet almost anywhere with Siapera (2012) suggesting that portability of communication devices such as cell phones has had a huge impact in the growth and usage of social media claiming that “this portability introduces an element of continuous availability and connectivity to the Internet across boundaries of space and time” (p. 8). Social media has become an important resource for the mobilization of collective action and subsequent creation, organisation and implementation of social movements around the world. Eltantawy & Wiest (2011), further state that there is little doubt that social media played a significant role in the revolutions that have struck the Arab world. In countries like Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen, rising action plans such as protests made up of thousands, have been organized through social media such as Facebook and Twitter (Kasslm, 2012). Social networks have broken the psychological barrier of fear by helping many to connect and share information and that it has given most people in the Arab world the knowledge that they are not alone, that there are others experiencing just as much brutality, just as much hardships, just as much lack of justice. In Namibia, the mass application of land by the Namibian youth, is an impact that can be attributed to the adoption and use of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter by the ARM.

According to Malumo (2012) approximately 470 000 Namibian citizens had access to mobile cell phones with potential to internet while figures from the Internet World Statistics (2016) indicate that the number has grown to 520 000 in 2016 representing 23.4 percent of the 2.2 million population.

The uptake of social media in Namibia has been exponential especially among the youths as can be seen from Facebook and Twitter users (Stoman & Stoman, 2014). As an emerging highly participative and empowerment communication channel, social media has an impact on the way people communicate. It connects people faster and has an advantage of instant communication where the exposure, engagement and the exchange is long lasting and constant. Although

still a developing nation, Namibia is part and parcel of the global village which is embracing technology fast. IPPR reports that Namibia, with a population of 2.1 (NSA, 2016) is increasingly taking to social media. It is estimated that 10 percent of the population is on Facebook, with a large percentage of these being in the youth age group of 18-35 years old (IPPR, 2014). It was also noted by IPPR (2014) that the use of social media in Namibia will become more prevalent. Statistics show an increase in the uptake in the use of mobile phones which ITU (2012) findings shows that the mobile cellular subscriptions per 100 inhabitants stands at 103 and the number of mobile phone users with potential access to the Internet at 470,000 (Ministry of ICT, 2012). Although the figures keep surging, politicians such as President Hage Geingob and the leader of the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA) which is the official opposition party, McHenry Venaani, are active on social media platforms (Stoman & Stoman, 2014).

Future social media platform will only survive if it allows itself to change function and format over the years lest it fails as Ryan (2015) suggest. While for many, social media is a simple means of communication making it easier to stay in contact with friends and family, it is for others an inexpensive marketing channel they can leverage to power their businesses (Taprial & Kanwar, 2012). In both contexts, social media has become a permanent fixture of society, and it's almost impossible to imagine a future without it. The brands might change and the platforms might evolve, but the social media concept is here to stay.

Some advantages of social networking include open communication and networking opportunities. On a personal level, it allows friends and family to connect no matter where they are in the world, and on a business level it allows companies to share information with employees and customers quickly (Ryan, 2015). No matter which profession an individual works in, networking is a vital part of success. Social media makes connecting with like-minded professionals easy and, through quality interactions, professionals can significantly grow their contact lists. Internet-savvy companies are using social media to advertise their products, build customer loyalty and many other functions. Interactions and feedback from customers help businesses to understand the market, and fine-tune their products and strategies (Ryan, 2015). Many business organizations organize promotions, contests and give away prizes to enthruse consumers to visit their social website page more often. Compared to television advertisements and other expensive forms of marketing, social media presence is a cheap and effective means to enhance brand image and popularity (Ryan, 2015). However, one of the downsides of social media is the overshare of personal information. Not only does this reflect a lack of social etiquette on the participant's part, it also endangers the security of their privacy. This is especially relevant when

employees use social media in the workplace, as they may inadvertently give away information which compromises company security (Miller, 2011).

Methodology

This study was carried out using a qualitative method in the form of a case study which Marshall & Rossman (1999) suggest it offers opportunities for conducting exploratory and descriptive research that uses the context and setting to search for deeper understanding of the subject of investigation and therefore best suited for this study. The purpose of a case study is to understand the case under investigation in its natural setting, acknowledging its complexity and context (Maree, 2007: 83). The Affirmative Repositioning Movement was the unit of analysis to determine how a social media platform such as Facebook, can have significant impact on its users. This research method is suitable for elaborative explanation of the impact of Facebook which was extensively used by the Affirmative Repositioning Movement during its 10 months campaign for access to land from November 2014 to July 2015. The research population for this study consisted of the leaders of the Affirmative Repositioning Movement, news editors of the traditional media and members of the ARM who are active on Facebook. This target population was identified as it constituted the audiences who were involved with the ARM activities. Leaders of the Affirmative Repositioning Movement were the initiators of the land activism communication which is under review in this study. News editors were responsible for editing reportage on the ARM activities while Facebook account holders, especially the youth debated the issue with intensity. The total sample of 10 comprised of five (5) most active users on the ARM Facebook page; one (1) news editor of New Era; one (1) news editor of the Namibian Sun, one (1) news editor from the Namibian and two (2) leaders of ARM.

Results

Scholars assert that what receives attention in the media is regarded very important by the audience (Akpabio, Mwilima, 2017). The two scholars opine that media framing can enhance understanding from an individual or broader societal context (p. 2). There are many theories and perspectives of framing such that it has been referred to as “fractured” (Entman, 1993: 51) and “passe-partout” (Van Gorp, 2007: 60). Framing still offers a way of understanding the power of a communication text and its ability to impact human consciousness (Akpabio, Mwilima, 2017). The way media context is framed influences human thoughts and actions and has the potential to foster empathy or indifference towards a group of people. Framing in traditional media is inherently shaped

through the journalism process, while scholars enlarge the theory of framing and refers to it as evolution frame (Guzman, 2016). In framing the events associated with the Affirmative Repositioning Movement (ARM), government allied media framed the ARM revolution as conflict against government while the independent media framed it as delinquent and violent youths who are set to disrupt the normal functioning of government (Haidula & Mongudhi, 2015). This study reveals how ARM has used the social media to frame their revolutionary activities to influence its actions by the Namibian youth. Namibia has a population of 2.3 million (STA, 2016) of which 36.4 per cent are below the age of 15 years. Statistically, the majority (57.32%) of Namibian population are young people aged between 0-24 years. Those aged between 25 and 54 years constitute 34.37%; 55-64 years (4.35%) and 65 years and over (3.96%).

Research shows that among the institutions least trusted by the young people is the media. The Nestle (2003) research which was conducted among young people shows that six in ten young people would trust a journalist to them the truth. This findings is reflective of the Namibian young people's negative attitudes towards the traditional media and relative choice of social media. The research further shows that two in five young people would not trust government minister or politician and this mistrust in government ministers continue to rise. In Namibia there is growing skeptical attitudes towards politicians by the Namibian youth. This may well explain the ARM revolution against local authority which were perceived reluctant to resolve the land question in their favour. Given the popularity ARM has enjoyed, the importance of its cause resonated well with the youth. The high rate of participation also signifies the relevance of the the research topic to the youth. Social media is being embraced everywhere because of its potential for instant interactivity and to spread news fast through mobile devices.

In terms of demographics, the findings show that 50 per cent of the respondents were below 25 years with 25 per cent of the research population in the age range of 25-35 years and another 25 per cent in the age category of 36 to 45 years. None of the respondents was above the age of 45 years. These figures gives a glimpse of the dominant group that are susceptible to the adoption of social media and give an impression that social media use in Namibia is dominated by the youths. This is also confirmed by Mutonga (2017). Coincidentally, these are the majority of people that are highly affected by urban land scarcity. The message by the ARM was well received by the Namibian youths because it sought to address issues affecting them socially as well as economically and the medium used perfectly suited the target population.

The findings show a 100 per cent mobile connectivity to social media through mobile phones by the research population. This connectivity is attributed to cheaper internet rates and the need to stay connected to social media. A total of 75 per cent of the respondents obtained real time information on social media more than other media channels. All participants were connected to Facebook and to different Namibian social groups on networking sites. It was also observed that more than half of the participants used social media to search for affordable accommodation and would read newspapers only when their stories were uploaded on social media. Social media continues to dominate as the latest competitive form of communication. A total of 63 per cent respondents are of the opinion that indeed internet has become part of their daily lives. Six respondents (75 per cent) believed that indeed ARM's campaign was highly successful because of the high rate of smart phone usage amongst the targeted group. Because of internet connectivity through mobile phones, the six respondents were convinced that social media impacted highly on the success of the ARM in championing its cause. The other (25 per cent) opined that that social media had an impact on their information distribution but it was not as "significant as it might look". This segment of the research population was still getting accustomed to social media and its ever increasing influence.

Conclusion

From the results gathered in this research study, it is clear that since the advent of internet, consumption of information via traditional methods such as television and newspaper have been losing their strength as we forge ahead in the 21st century. Dutta-Bergman (2004) suggests that this significant shift from the use of traditional media methods can be attributed to the formation and growth of - first the World Wide Web – then social media. For instance, in the second quarter of 2008 alone, Forrester research predicted that 75 per cent of all internet surfers use social media by either posting videos to sites such as YouTube, joining social networks on websites such as Facebook, or even posting blogs, showcasing increase from the year before (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Furthermore, research conducted by the Nielsen Company (2010) in the United States of America indicated that citizens spend virtually 25 per cent of their free time on social networks and blogs. Although the number of individuals that are using social media avenues to connect to others is increasingly growing, many agree that a Facebook fan page or a Twitter account is not a substitute for an integrated marketing plan to reach a target market.

In an attempt to understand why individuals are more susceptible to attend to one particular media avenue versus another, various media consumption theories have been proffered. Although this study did not centre on determining which marketing method (new or old) is better, it is imperative to understand why individuals obtain information from the sources that they do. It is theorized that if any individual is interested in one particular topic, s/he will consume information on that topic in not only one medium, but most likely read, watch, or listen to information that is closely related to this topic in various other forms of media (Dutta-Bergman, 2004). Although social media can be measured in various ways, Turner (2010) believes that quantitative metrics, qualitative metrics, and return-on-investment metrics are the most substantial categories that determine the effectiveness of an awareness campaign promoted via social media. The research findings as discussed in this chapter indicate that social media is a communication force to be reckoned with. Pressure groups such as ARM and other can take advantage of the prevalence of smartphones to plan and disseminate information that can assist the citizenry in, for instance, staying in touch with government ministries and departments.

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