

# The use of social media by three political parties during South Africa's 2014 general election

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## Abstract

Since the first democratic election in South Africa in 1994, electoral campaigns have changed significantly, largely due to social media, which now play a vital role in influencing voters throughout the world. This study examines the social media campaigns of three major South African political parties, namely the African National Congress (ANC), the Democratic Alliance (DA) and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), prior to the 2014 general election. Data comprised interviews with members of Parliament (MPs) of all three parties, and an analysis of their Facebook pages, Twitter feeds and YouTube channels. The study finds that, while all three parties made active use of social media, the full potential of this form of communication was not exploited, as they continued to disseminate traditional political messages instead of interacting actively with voters.

## 1. Background

South Africa is a constitutional democracy, with a five-year electoral cycle. Among others, politicians campaign via social media platforms. Election campaigns comprise the efforts of politicians and political parties to influence and gain the support of voters prior to elections. Given the digital revolution, social media play a growing role in political campaigns and political communication (David 2022, John 2018).

Social media are computer-mediated interactive technologies that encourage the creating or sharing of information, ideas, and other forms of communication (David 2022: 10). Social media comprise resources such as online blogs, audio/video tools (YouTube), internet chat rooms, cellular and computer messaging, and social networking sites (Suleiman 2019, Chepkemoi, Situma and Murung 2018, Sharive 2018, Oyetunde, 2017). Social media are also taken to include all technologies that promote social interaction, collaboration, discussion and debates (Fatimayin 2018; Chepkemoi, Situma and Murung 2018). Social media such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, Myspace YouTube, Pinterest, Google+, Tumblr, and Instagram are prevalent in contemporary society, including politics (Ngonso 2019; Adeniji and Anyanwu 2019; Talatu and Murja 2018).

Social media usage is growing because of the information revolution (Johnson 2021). Social media also change the way in which people communicate and share knowledge (Oubibi et al 2018; Farjana, Priyanka and Dipti 2020; Fatimayin 2018, Oyetunde 2017). Globally, 3.6 billion people use social media, up from 3.4 billion in 2019 (Johnson 2021), and they are projected to grow to 4.41 billion in 2025 (Johnson 2022). Today, social media influence nearly every aspect of social life, including politics. They enable politicians to communicate with

unlimited audiences of potential voters (Yolisa and Osunkunle 2017:149). Citizens also use social media to access political information, stay up to date on current political events, and participate in the political process (Yang and DeHart 2016). Social media amplify the political campaigns and messages of political candidates (Duncan 2014,153). Social media can also be used by political parties to present their agenda to voters, and mobilise a larger support base. Given the availability of free blog and video sharing platforms and social media, the cost of communicating with voters through social media is significantly lower than through broadcast media.

Social media amplify the political campaigns and messages of political candidates (Duncan 2014: 153). The value of social media campaigns was apparent in America's 2008 presidential election when Barack Obama's campaign team widely employed Facebook, MySpace and YouTube, together with other social media such as podcasting and mobile messaging. In what was termed the 'Facebook election', Obama won nearly 70 per cent of the vote among Americans aged 18-25. His Facebook and Twitter followers increased daily, and were also able to share their views and send messages to one another (Lauren 2013).

By 2011, Obama's Twitter account, @BarackObama, which he used to promote legislation and garner support for his policies, was the third most followed in the world (Lauren 2013). In Europe, Twitter is widely used during EU elections, which are regarded as 'second order' elections to national elections (Daniel, Obholzer and Hurka 2019, William and Lukas 2020). Social media such as Twitter expand the possibilities for individual-centred campaigning by broadcasting positions, creating and sharing content, and increasing voter turnout outside political party gatekeeping (William and Lukas 2020; Braun and Schwarzbözl 2019). Twitter provides a preliminary online electoral connection with voters, leading to more organic forms of two-way interactions (Kessel and Castelein 2016; Ridge-Newman and Mitchell 2016).

Social media enable four emergent campaign techniques: voters micro targeting, personalisation, interactivity, and sustained engagement (Yolisa and Oluyinka 2017: 152). Voter micro targeting allows campaigners to target specific people in respect of specific issues, thereby appealing to different voters in different ways. Social media also allow the personalisation of politics, accompanied by its depoliticisation. Candidates use niche media such as biographies and comedy talk shows to promote information about their personalities. This fosters a bond between voters and candidates, increasing political support and participation (Yolisa and Oluyinka 2017: 152). Interactivity involves voters communicating directly with campaigns, and fosters a sense of community. Sustained engagement occurs when candidates maintain contact with their supporters or party members through social networking sites (Yolisa and Oluyinka 2017, 152). This allows politicians to remain in contact with supporters both during and between elections.

Social media played a vital role in South Africa's fifth general election in 2014. Popular social media were Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Mxit (Lauren 2013). Mxit (pronounced 'mix it') was a free instant messaging application that ran on more than 8 000 devices, including feature phones, Symbian S60, Android, BlackBerry, iPhone, iPad, Windows Phone, and tablets (Atagana 2011). Social media are particularly attractive to younger voters. In July 2013, Mxit had 7.4 million monthly subscribers, including 6.3 million South Africans (Atagana 2011). At the time of the election, 88 per cent of young people (in the 15-34 age group) in South Africa were living in homes with access to a cellular phone (Lauren 2013). In 2014, there were 11.8 million Facebook users in South Africa, with 9.2 million accessing Facebook by mobile phone (BusinessTech 2014).

## 2. South African general elections

Elections allow citizens in democratic countries to cast their votes for candidates of their choice. In South Africa, general elections are held every five years. The Constitution of South Africa (1996) provides for three branches of government, namely the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. It recognises the doctrine of the separation of powers by providing a range of mechanisms designed to distribute power among the different spheres and levels of government, and introducing various institutional checks and balances to prevent the abuse of state power.

The separation of powers originates from Principle 5 of the Interim Constitution of 1993, which stated that 'there shall be a separation of powers between the legislature, executive and judiciary with appropriate checks and balances to ensure accountability, responsiveness and openness. Thus, the final Constitution adopted in 1996 had to give effect to this principle. It empowers parliament, and prescribes the duties of MPs, including oversight, formulating legislation, and holding the executive to account.

South Africa operates a parliamentary system of government. The National Assembly consists of 400 members elected by proportional representation, with a closed list approach. Two hundred members are elected from national party lists; the other 200 are elected from provincial party lists in each of the nine provinces. The fifth general election in South Africa was held on 7 May 2014 to elect MPs to the National Assembly and the nine provincial legislatures (News24: 2014). The South African Electoral Commission (IEC) registered more than 150 political parties that contested the national and provincial elections. The 2014 election was also the first time South African citizens were allowed to vote outside the country (Baksh 2014).

The IEC launched a social media campaign to encourage young people to register and vote. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Mxit were utilised to address enquiries from young voters (Lauren 2013). The IEC's Facebook page received over 60 000 'likes' and followers in advance of the voter registration drive.

The South African parliament and provincial legislatures are established in terms of the 1996 Constitution. The legislature functions autonomously and co-operatively within the framework provided by the Constitution. The Constitution also provides for a bicameral parliament comprising the National Assembly (NA) and the National Council of Provinces (NCOP), set up in 1996 to replace the Senate that existed under the interim constitution from 1994 to 1996. The National Assembly is the House directly elected by voters, while the NCOP is elected by the provinces and represents them to ensure that provincial interests are considered in the national sphere of government.

This study will examine the social media campaign strategies of three political parties, namely the African National Congress (ANC), Democratic Alliance (DA) and Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). The EFF, led by the former ANC Youth League leader Julius Malema, recognised the significance of social media in electoral campaigning. The EFF received 56 396 Facebook 'likes', compared with the ANC's 54 315 and the DA's 41 812.

Surprisingly, the picture on Twitter was quite different. The ANC had 81 368 followers, followed by the DA (@DA News) with 44 602, and the EFF (@EconFreedomZA) with 28 198 (Lauren 2013). The next section examines the social media strategies utilised by these three

parties. The MPs who were eventually elected comprised 249 ANC MPs, 89 DA MPs and 25 EFF MPs (IEC 2014).

### 3. The ANC's social media strategy

The ANC was founded on 8 January 1912 as the South African Native Congress, whose name was changed in 1923 (Inman and Rubinfeld 2013; Butler 2011; Francis 2011; Lodge and Ursula 2006). The party was formed by political figures such as John Dube, Pixley ka Isaka Seme, Sol Plaatje, and other prominent members of the chieftaincy. Its goal was to eradicate apartheid in all its manifestations and to create a united, democratic and non-racial country. Following increasingly militant protest action, it was banned in 1960, and went into exile. In the years of growing political conflict up to the early 1990s, its members were in prison, in exile, active in the Mass Democratic Movement, and also in some Patriotic Front organisations.

According to an ANC respondent, the ANC's ideology is strongly influenced by socialism, Marxism and Leninism (ANC MP 2, personal interview). In terms of Marxist ideology, Marxism-Leninism is the primary force organising society into a socialist state, a giant leap toward an egalitarian society (Terence, Dagger, and O'Neill 2014). The ANC's 'political mansion has many ideological rooms' and is therefore an ideological hybrid, implying that it has a 'broad church' ideology (Booyesen 2012).

Before the 2014 election, its then spokesperson, Jackson Mthembu, stated that the party 'appreciates the significance of social media on domestic and international affairs, as well as its relevance as a platform or voice to all/for all South Africans'. He also stated that the party would use social media to engage in a discussion of vital political issues, and to allow ordinary South Africans to communicate directly with the party. During the campaign, the ANC's Twitter followers rose to more than 120 000 (@MyANC). The ANC issued more than 11 100 tweets, and also followed 6 570 accounts. Its active use of social media was illustrated when it provided free Wi Fi at its #Siyanqoba rally in the FNB Stadium in Johannesburg. As a result, its Facebook and Twitter support bases grew significantly during the weekend prior to election day.

### 4. The DA's social media strategy

The DA's philosophy is underpinned by liberalism, a political philosophy or world view founded on ideas of liberty and equality of opportunity. According to a DA respondent, the party's ideology is underpinned by liberalism (Personal Interview, DA MP 3). Liberalism is a political philosophy or world view founded on ideas of liberty and equality (Kanazawa 2010, Dunn 1993). The operationalisation of the concept of liberalism is attributed to John Locke who believed that each person has a natural right to life, liberty and property, and that governments should not violate these rights based on the social contract (Terence, Dagger & O'Neill 2014). According to Kanazawa (2010:38), liberalism comprises a genuine concern for the welfare of genetically unrelated others and a willingness to contribute large proportions of private resources for the welfare of such others.

Liberals typically support ideas and programmes such as freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, free markets, civil rights, democratic societies, secular governments, gender equality and international cooperation (Huntington 2002). Another DA

respondent stated: 'I am a liberal thinker and a member of the liberal school... I believe in freedom of speech ...'

The modern-day DA emerged from white parliamentary opposition to the ruling National Party. The party's origins can be traced back to the mid-1950s when some younger members of the United Party felt they were not providing strong enough opposition to the National Party and its apartheid policy, prompting them to break away and form the Progressive Party in 1959. For a period of 13 years, the party was represented by a sole MP. From 1974 onwards, the party experienced a resurgence of white voter support. It also absorbed breakaways from the disintegrating United Party, becoming the Progressive Reform Party and Progressive Federal Party in the process. After the 1987 elections, the PFP merged with the IP and NDM to form the Democratic Party (DP), which became the official opposition after the 1999 general election. In 2000, the New National Party (NNP) and Federal Alliance joined the DP to form the Democratic Alliance (Umoh 2021). While the NNP later broke away, the DP remained the official opposition.

During the 2014 election campaign, the DA (@DA News) had 77 300 twitter followers, tweeted 26 900 times, and followed 26 100 accounts (BusinessTech 2014). It also had the strongest and most effective presence on Facebook. Following an initial ban by the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), it also launched a powerful YouTube campaign, with its #Ayisafani commercial garnering more than 700 000 views. This advertisement depicted Mmusi Maimane, the DA's spokesperson and candidate for the Gauteng premiership, standing in front of a mirror discussing the state of the country. The caption encouraged supporters to 'Help the DA fight corruption, eTolls, and Nkandla' and provided a donation link.

The DA also used Twitter and Facebook to share images of alleged election transgressions, such as reports of their posters being removed and replaced with ANC posters. South Africans also shared their political views on personal social networks.

## 5. The EFF's social media strategy

The EFF's ideology is underpinned by the principle of economic emancipation. The party had its origins when Julius Malema and Floyd Shivambu met with politically like-minded individuals in Soweto in July 2013 (Robinson 2014, Horwitz 2016). Malema, Sindiso Magaqand and Shivambu eventually founded the EFF on 17 August 2013. In the 2014 election, the party managed to garner 1 169 259 votes, amounting to a 6.35 per cent share. Its 25 seats made it the third largest party in the South African Parliament (Umoh 2021).

Julius Malema, the EFF's leader, served as president of the ANC Youth League from April 2008 to April 2012, when he was expelled after being found guilty of sowing divisions within the party.

According to EFF respondents, its ideology is inspired by the broader Marxist-Leninist tradition and Franconian schools of thought (personal interviews, EFF MP1 and MP4). Another respondent stated that Malema was driven by his 'strong Marxist beliefs', which informed the party and its programme. Therefore, the EFF has a broadly anti-capitalist foundation, informed by Marxism-Leninism. Its slogan is 'Economic freedom in our lifetime'.

Malema and the EFF make vigorous use of social media. During the 2014 election campaign, Malema (@Julius S Malema), the EFF commander-in-chief, had 447,000 followers, released 6

600 tweets, and followed 169 other accounts (BusinessTech 2014). The EFF had 83 900 likes on Facebook, against the DA's 97 500, the ANC's 28 600 and MyANC's 141 000.

These figures show that their online followers grew significantly. However, their messages were restricted to traditional political messages, such as political leaders' addresses, public meetings, and political slogans. Duncan (2014:153) notes that parties contesting the 2014 election made poor use of social media by broadcasting existing political messages rather than interacting with potential supporters. Therefore, he concludes that they did not use social media effectively as they merely carried their analog strategies to their digital strategies (Duncan 2014: 153).

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has discussed the use of social media by the three major parties contesting the South African general election in 2014. Worldwide, social media have become a powerful political tool which is widely used by political parties to influence voters prior to elections. Given their relative ease of use, social media are particularly useful for smaller political parties as well as independent candidates. Social media provide a rational public sphere for politicians to communicate directly with voters. Voters can easily participate in political debate, influence political decisions, and have their voices heard, whereas politicians can share their manifestos.

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