

# FACEBOOK: REVOLUTIONISING ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN IN BOTSWANA?

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## ABSTRACT

*Political candidates and parties harnessed Facebook as a tool for political mobilisation and communication at the time of the Botswana 2014 election. This paper explores the use of Facebook as a campaign tool in the 2014 Botswana general election. It argues that the extensive use of Facebook in political campaigning has added a new dimension to electoral campaigns in Botswana, by allowing political parties a relatively cheap means of transmitting information.*

*Furthermore, Facebook has democratised media access, and has afforded people who have previously been side-lined by traditional media an important platform for political mobilization. Accordingly, Facebook has widened the democratic space and reduced the disparities in the electoral arena. Most importantly, it has generated interest in politics among young people. The intersection between Facebook and traditional media and other social media has augmented their efficiency by amplifying their reach. However, Facebook does not replace traditional campaign approaches but rather serves to augment them.*

**Keywords:** democracy, Botswana, electoral campaigns, social media, political parties.

## INTRODUCTION

Initially meant for social networking and interacting with acquaintances, social media – in the form of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube – are now becoming crucial instruments in political communication. The 2008 Barack Obama election to the White House is partly attributed to his extensive use of social media to canvass support and raise funds. The successful use of Facebook and Twitter in mobilising revolutionaries who ousted the East African dynasties has demonstrated the efficacy of social media as a tool of mobilisation.

Following these events, considerable academic attention has been directed at understanding the role of social media in political campaigns. The use of Facebook in election campaigns and political communication has arguably widened the democratic space, allowing previously marginalised groups to participate in the democratic process (Javuru 2013; Wasswa 2013). Most importantly, social media have facilitated political communication for parties that were struggling to reach potential voters.

However, questions remain about the efficacy of Facebook as a political communication medium. Questions abound regarding the manner in which people view information shared through social media, and whether this can be used to predict the outcome of elections and gauge the atmosphere on the ground. Taking these concerns as a point of departure, we seek to examine the use of social media in Botswana's 2014 general election campaign. Focusing mainly on Facebook, we argue that social media have revitalised election campaigns in Botswana by expanding political communication avenues. To some extent, social media have addressed the problem of unfair access to the media, as previously side-lined opposition parties can tap into social media to talk to their voters.

The efficacy of Facebook derives from features such as sharing pictures and information, status updates, posts, tags and the 'like' function. However, social media do not replace the traditional medium of political campaigning but rather serve to compliment it. We argue that the integration of traditional media and new media has enhanced political communication, which therefore presents a great opportunity for all parties to reach out to their voters. Unlike traditional media, new media are accessible at less cost, and are insulated from excessive editorial interference and state censorship.

The first section of the paper broadly discusses the use of social media in politics. Drawing on the experiences of the 2008 presidential elections in the United States, and some African elections, we then examine the role played by social media in election campaigns. To provide some context, the section that follows briefly shows the evolution of election campaigning in Botswana, with a focus on freedom squares, house-to-house campaigns, and the use of billboards.

In the final section of the article, we focus on the role of social media in the 2014 general election campaign in Botswana.

### *The Efficacy of Social Media in Politics*

Broadly referred to as Web 2.0 applications, new media applications come in different forms. YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter are the most popular, but social networks such as Tumblr, Pinterest and many others are also important (Vergeer, Hermas & Sams 2011). Social media rely heavily on internet-based social networks that allow people to develop profiles and link with other users who have also signed into the networks. Vergeer et al. (2011) describe these networks as 'weblogs', and comment that such social networks use a 'bottom-up approach, focused on sharing content online, collaboration among people and enabling socializing online...' (p. 3). Users can view the profiles of other users, interact through blog posts visible to the subscriber's Facebook friends, and post pictures, messages and links to other sources (Wasswa 2013).

Unlike more traditional internet sites, Web 2.0 applications have been able to draw a lot of attention because of their interactivity. These applications promote online expression because the online community can post their views and engage in debates (Kushin & Yamamoto 2010). The applications allow for the formation of social communities and groups, which facilitates the exchange of ideas and discussions on many issues of public concern. Through their picture and video posting facilities, they are able to engage subscribers in political events that are happening far away, even as those events unfold.

Viewed from this perspective, the internet promotes deliberative and participatory democracy. It is, without doubt, becoming one of the dominant political communication tools. Realising the potential of social media, political parties and politicians have sought to tap into the networks and social communities to canvass political support. As a result, recent elections across the world have seen an increased use of social media to raise funds for campaigns and to solicit votes.

Wasswa (2013) claims that campaigns play a role in influencing voters, by setting the agenda and by reminding voters about issues of concern and the performance of serving officers. To some extent they determine what needs to be discussed and perhaps how it must be discussed. Wasswa (2013, p. 1) writes that 'Today, political victories are determined by the quantity and quality of information that campaigns can access with regards to political rivals and constituents.' Those who fail to join the social media hype will therefore fall behind in the political game.

The utility value of Facebook derives from its huge subscription base. Effing, Hillegersberg and Huibers (2011) state that in April 2011 Facebook had 600 million registered subscribers, and people spend more time on Facebook than any other website. This makes it one of the most effective mediums for delivering messages. Facebook has bridged the digital divide, and most importantly it has democratised media access, particularly to less-resourced candidates and political parties. It has also enhanced political competition. Because of these strengths, social media present a prime opportunity to democratise election campaigns, by allowing groups that could have been disadvantaged by a lack of resources to reach their potential voters (Vergeer et al. 2011).

Despite this great potential and some evidence of extensive use of social media in certain political communications, Effing et al. (2011) observe that the use of social media in electoral campaigns tends to lack a strategy or comprehensive plan. This hinders political parties and candidates from obtaining maximum benefit. Vergeer et al. (2011) acknowledge that the liberal nature of social media is not without risks, because although candidates might not have public relations skills they assume a leading role in their online campaigns.

Vergeer et al. (2011) highlight that social media have reduced party control over candidates' campaign strategies and interactions with supporters. Generally this means that candidates express their position and views independently of party influence. Candidates are directly accountable to the Facebook community for their decisions. This creates a strong bond between the electorate and the candidate (Vergeer et al., 2011). Crucially, unlike traditional media, which do not permit immediate feedback or allow a candidate the chance to immediately clarify a comment if they are misinterpreted, Facebook allows such instant feedback.

Conveniently, traditional media, including newspapers and radio stations, have joined the Facebook hype to expand their audiences. This means that in addition to traditional channels, news is transmitted today through social networks in a way that allows for conversations and dialogue about issues. According to Javuru (2013), this interaction encourages deliberation and debates on different public matters. In this way, social media can promote citizenship and deliberative democracy (Javuru 2013).

Furthermore, Javuru (2013) observes that accredited and affiliated journalists can use their own Facebook pages to upload news and reports, with little restriction imposed by laws such as those which regulate formal journalism and newspaper editorial policies. In this way, Facebook promotes independent reporting. Accordingly, Javuru (2013) concludes that

... new media is seen by some as an antidote to the heavy handed approach with which the government sometimes handles criticisms

from the media largely because one can be anonymous and there are no premises to raid and close down. (p. 361)

Although social media are widely credited for promoting political engagement, Makala (2014) claims that relying excessively on social media to mobilise voters is often viewed as elitist, because people without internet access are left out. However, the integration between the traditional and social media suggests that the new media can have as much influence as traditional media. It is not clear whether Twitter and Facebook politics reflect offline political moods. However, just like the traditional media, they can provide an important measure of public sentiment.

### *Social Media and Election Campaigns*

Not much is known about the actual effect of social media on election outcomes, or its intersection with other factors in influencing voter decisions. However, the effectiveness of social media in mobilising political action should not be underestimated. Although not the only factor, social media certainly played a critical role in bringing down Middle East and East African dynasties.

According to Bosch (2013), the online 'event' of the Egyptian revolution saw more than 80 000 people being mobilised by social media, mostly Facebook. Evidence also suggests that the Arab revolution and Philippines upheaval, which culminated in the resignation of the president, were both facilitated by social media. This indicates that social media are becoming very useful tools for political mobilisation (Bosch 2013).

The 2008 American presidential elections also saw an increase in the use of social media to rally voters. President Obama, in particular, relied heavily on various social networks to reach out to supporters, individuals and organisations (Johnson & Perlmutter 2009). Twitter, Flickr, Digg, YouTube, Myspace and Facebook were among the Online Social Interactive Media (OSIM) that he used. Indeed, some people attribute Obama's success in the 2008 election to his extensive use of social networking websites. Obama's use of web 2.0 technology has sparked much debate and academic interest in the relationship between social media and election campaigns.

Similarly, the 2014 Indian election saw an increased use of Facebook. In view of the extensive use of social media, CNN referred to the election as 'India's first social media election' (Makama 2014). Politicians in African countries have also used Facebook extensively in election campaigns. President Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria and his cabinet, as well as the Rwandese President, Paul Kagame, were among the first heads of state to interact with people through Facebook (Makama 2014).

Kenyan president Uhuru Kenyatta also used social media to engage young people (Tracey 2013; Wasswa 2013). Kenya has more than 14 million internet users, many of whom make use of social media sites. Uhuru Kenyatta's Facebook page had an enormous following, with over 500 000 'likes'. Without doubt, many comments or items of information reached more than just these 500 000 followers. According to Portland Communications, Kenya ranks second after South Africa in the use of mobile social networking. Wasswa (2013) states that social media profoundly contributed to Kenyatta's success.

Tracey (2013) claims that political parties were visible in social media in the build-up to the 2014 election in South Africa. By 13 November 2014, the Economic Freedom Fighters had the most likes on Facebook, followed by the African National Congress and Democratic Alliance (Tracey 2013). According to Bosch (2013), South African political parties, the Electoral Commission, and civil society are all stepping up their use of social media to drive the masses to the polls. Facebook is one of the most widely used social network sites in South Africa, and with 3.2 million users it ranks as the most popular of all social network media in South Africa. If the number of followers on Facebook pages is anything to go by, it seems safe to conclude that messages communicated on Facebook would reach a considerable number of people.

A 2012 study conducted by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) on the 'South African mobile generation' found that South Africa is one of the leading nations in the use of mobile technology and social networking in Africa. This wide access has facilitated citizen participation and engagement in politics, and can generate interest in voting and other democratic processes. According to Wasswa (2013), most young adults develop an interest in politics by interacting with politically engaged friends on social media. In this way, they help to transmit up-to-date information through blogs and online posts.

Although social media are definitely becoming an important factor in political campaigning, some experts dismiss social media dialogue as 'pointless babble' (Pearanalytics 2009, in Tumasjan et al. 2010). However, experiences across the world suggest that the potential of social media should not be underrated. According to Javuru (2013), some scholars of democracy and participation question the diversity of views and the quality of arguments advanced on social media. Such scholars posit that social media involves interactions between people who already share common positions and views on public matters, and therefore do not serve to broaden debates. Javuru (2013, p. 370) states that 'These commentators argue that much online interaction simply involves the meeting of "likeminded" people leading to a fragmented public sphere of insulated "deliberative enclaves" where group positions and practices are reinforced rather than openly critiqued.'

Javuru (2013) also claims that the potential of social media to act as an engine for public debate and engagement is compromised by people having limited internet access. While it may be true that the effectiveness of social media could be compromised by the digital divide, the increasing sophistication of mobile phones has greatly improved many people's access to the internet and therefore to social media. Bosch (2013), writing about South Africa, confirms that mobile internet will bridge the digital divide, and comments that the same holds true for most developing countries.

### EVOLUTION OF ELECTION CAMPAIGNING IN BOTSWANA

Election campaigning has evolved over time in the politics of Botswana, since the country's first elections in 1965. Before the advent of modern tools of participation, notably social media, freedom square platforms and 'house to house' campaigns defined election campaign strategies for political parties. As Charlton (1993, p. 351) puts it,

political rallies, known in Botswana as 'freedom squares' since their inception in the late colonial period by the BPP (which in turn was following South African practice and terminology), overwhelmingly dominate the electoral campaign tactics of all Botswana's political parties.

Freedom squares still dominate the campaign environment, and provide a platform for political parties to campaign and canvass votes for their candidates. However, they sometimes degenerate into forums where candidates heckle and insult each other. Molomo (2000) states that political rallies, the so-called freedom squares, are characterised by abusive language and character assassination, and on some occasions insults are hurled at the state president. Parties and candidates attack and discredit their opponents. Charlton (1993) writes that freedom squares are characterised by a high degree of informality and a tendency to personalise political arguments. In the same vein, Lekorwe (1989, p. 222) observes that 'in general, freedom square audiences clearly prefer speakers who heap abuse on the opposition and glorify their own party.'

But this is not to suggest that policy issues are never discussed at political rallies or freedom squares. These platforms provide parties with an opportunity to reach out to a large audience and sell their programmes and manifestoes. Indeed, there is some policy discussion. For instance, according to Molutsi and Holm (1990, p. 335), 'cabinet decided without any consultation with the Ministry of Education

to provide free secondary education because the BNF was calling in freedom squares for the abolition of these fees and gaining considerable popularity thereby.'

In addition, freedom squares have enabled parties to better appreciate the problems that bedevil local communities – more so because they are usually held at a relatively central point within a constituency. This has helped parties to draft their programmes in a manner that reflects the needs of the people. Molutsi and Holm (1990, p. 335) state that freedom squares 'can show the relation between their organizations and particular local developments or problems and parties formulate their programmes anew for each community, specifying for instance that a dam, bridge or school will or should be built.'

Freedom squares create hype and excitement around elections, thus helping to mobilise support for political parties and provide voters with election-related information. In this regard, the effect of freedom squares on election campaigns was highlighted by a Democracy Research Project survey in 1987, in which 31% of respondents said they mainly received information about issue positions through freedom squares (Molutsi & Holm 1990). The same survey showed that 28% of respondents received most of their information about political parties from freedom squares.

Previously ignored by parties, billboards came into vogue in the 1999 elections as parties geared up their campaign strategies. Mokopakgosi and Molomo (2000) observe that in the 1999 elections there was much affection for billboards, and calendars and timetables bearing candidates' photos were distributed to university students. Radio stations also played a crucial role during electoral campaigns, with parties airing their messages through both private and public radio stations. According to Mokopakgosi and Molomo (2000), political parties took advantage of a new private radio station called Yarona FM, which broadcast advertisements for those parties.

None the less, traditional campaign strategies are limited in terms of their reach, affordability and accessibility for all political parties. According to Mokopakgosi and Molomo (2000, p. 11), 'these methods, especially public rallies, though effective to some extent, fail to reach certain segments of the population, especially professionals and the elderly'.

Ntsabane and Ntau (2006) claim that the use of strategies that blend entertainment and political campaigning could go a long way in mobilising young adults. Indeed, Facebook campaigns in particular contributed profoundly to mobilising the youth in the 2014 general elections. However, despite the advent of social media as a new form of participation and a new political platform, traditional campaign strategies remain relevant and are an important aspect of campaigns during elections. Social media have not eclipsed them into history, but have rather augmented them – particularly to reach young people. Political

parties are moving towards an intersection between traditional and new campaign strategies to amplify their reach. An example is billboards that display social media icons for websites where voters can access parties' messages.

### BOTSWANA 2014 GENERAL ELECTIONS

The 2014 general election in Botswana was arguably the most hotly contested election in the history of Botswana's democracy. Stakes were high in both the opposition and ruling parties, as well as civil society. Ordinary Botswana, young and old, joined the fray. Talk about the elections dominated many conversations. The media – both electronic and print, traditional and the new – were awash with reports on political campaigning.

For the first time in the history of Botswana, political analysts could not speak with certainty about the outcome of the elections. The political landscape had changed compared with previous elections. The elections were contested by only three parties: the Botswana Congress Party (BCP), the Umbrella for Democratic Change (UDC), and the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) – which had suffered a split in 2010. The contesting parties were led by young and vibrant leaders. However, adding a twist to this scenario was the large number of independent candidates who also contested the elections.

By any measure, the euphoria of election time and the events preceding it, including the sudden death of opposition leader Gomolemo Motswaledi, certainly made the 2014 elections markedly different from previous ones. The campaign strategies, the nature of issues raised, and the interest of young people in politics were additional features that made the 2014 election unique.

One outcome of young people's interest in politics was the increased use of social media as a mobilising tool. Traditional media started making use of social media to amplify their reach. This extensive use of social media, in particular Facebook, added a new dimension to the campaigns. Candidates did not have to rely on traditional media to communicate with the electorate; their messages could be delivered undiluted and in real time. This ignited excitement among many subscribers, whose attention was drawn to election debates and issues related to the upcoming elections.

The three main political parties and their candidates all had a presence in social media. Individual candidates also created their own pages, each bearing their party colours and listing the principles for which they stood. Altogether, the Botswana 2014 general election saw an unprecedented use of social media as a campaign tool. Facebook pages of Botswana youth were dominated by pictures taken at political rallies and portraits of political candidates. Certainly social media had become an important platform for political campaigning.

On the opposition front, parliamentary candidate Ndaba Gaolathe had his own Facebook page called 'Ndaba Gaolathe-Gaborone Bonnington South 2014'. By 22 September 2014, this page had accumulated more than 8 000 likes. The page showed his contact number and the constituency he was contesting. It also contained various political messages directed at electorates. The same page was used to update the public about Gaolathe's schedule and the activities of his party. Many posts attracted numerous positive responses.

Gaolathe's page also displayed a message about the UDC presidential launch rally in Khuduga grounds. His friends and followers could therefore follow his on-the-ground campaign and attend political rallies, as well as sharing their ideas and concerns on Facebook. Most importantly, he posted photographs taken during his campaign, showing him interacting with the masses in the streets of his constituency. This was important. The Gaborone Bonnington South constituency comprises locations that are generally occupied by low and middle income residents, who would typically vote for a 'people's person' or somebody they can identify with – and especially if they could interact directly with that person.

Other Facebook accounts included that of UDC Gaborone Central constituency, which was named 'UDC Gaborone Central'. It showed a photo of the late Gomolemo Motswaledi, who had been the party candidate for the constituency, Secretary General of the UDC, and the President of the Botswana Movement for Democracy. Despite his death – and after it – the page remained active. Thus, evidently the page was administered by his campaign team. What is particularly intriguing is the basis for which the page was established. According to a pinned post, 'This page is about assurance of a better Constituency under the representation of Gomolemo Motswaledi in Parliament and updates thereof.' By September 2014 the page had accumulated 8 195 likes, which suggests that messages would have been viewed by thousands of people, well beyond the number of 'friends' of the page.

The page was packed with messages of condolences, and eulogies for Motswaledi that had been delivered by various speakers at his funeral. Former President Masire's speech, which some people believed endorsed the UDC, was among the many shared on this page. The page was also dominated by pictures of UDC rallies. In addition, the page was used to invite people to the launch of the candidacy of Gaborone Central candidate, Phenyio Butale, who had replaced Motswaledi.

The use of Facebook allowed the UDC to connect with many people it otherwise would not have been able to reach, especially because Phenyio Butale had entered the race rather late. With the help of Facebook, UDC supporters were able to mobilise quickly, which they could have not done with mere posters or newspaper adverts. Even more crucially, Facebook was cost-efficient. Other

UDC pages included 'UDC 2014 Francistown', 'UDC Mogoditshane' and 'UDC Serowe branch'.

It is important to note that voters do not focus only on policies that are presented; presenting a winning image is also important. Facebook, with its photo-upload function, has afforded many politicians – who would not be able to buy airtime on television or advertisement space in newspapers – an opportunity to present themselves to voters.

Social media were used to complement the campaigns 'on the ground'. For example, both the UDC and BCP announced their bus tours on social media. The UDC presidential candidate's launch, during which the buses were unveiled, was widely publicised on Facebook. The party combined two campaign approaches that were both appealing to young people. Hence the large youth turnover at rallies can partly be ascribed to the use of Facebook, as well as to posters and flyers (which also contained information about social media links).

With their limited resources, opposition parties could not afford either radio or television adverts. Facebook was surely their main tool of mobilisation. Vergeer et al. (2011, p. 9) state that

By utilizing new media such as social network sites, and Twitter in particular, new and fringe parties generally lacking substantial media attention might create more online attention and interest among people on the web and, as such, leveling the political playing field.

This statement could not be more apt, especially in a democracy where opposition parties have consistently blamed their poor performance on a lack of funding and limited access to the media. Urban dwellers are especially important in this scenario, as they are technologically literate and possibly the most active Facebook users. An opposition political activist who was quoted in *Africa Review* (2014) confirmed that because the opposition's supporters are generally urban dwellers and young people, Facebook campaigning is paramount.

Writing fifteen years ago, Mokopakgosi and Molomo (2000) commented that studies had shown that political parties in Botswana had not been highly innovative in their campaign strategies. Given what transpired during the past election, this view cannot hold anymore. The 2014 elections show an improvement in campaign approaches. As Gabathuse (2014) observes, 'the political parties are proving to all and sundry that the campaign methods are not static but dynamic and are changing with times'.

Specifically, the use of social media, bus tours, choppers, and other methods created excitement about the elections, especially among young adults – whose level of participation in politics had previously been worrisome. Branding and

slogans were a trend in the 2014 election, and most people had some form of contact with the election craze. Attesting to this, Gabathuse (2014) wrote that 'The BCP and UDC taglines of "Ready to Lead" and "Embrace Change" respectively have been given sufficient exposure and are almost known to every Motswana. These new innovations have ensured that the parties' slogans imprint upon people's minds.'

Dumelang Saleshando, the presidential candidate for the BCP and Gaborone Central parliamentary candidate, was among the politicians whose Facebook accounts were active. His page contained many updates on his bus tour schedule as well as his messages. Hence his messages were accessible not only to people who attended his rallies, but also to thousands of Facebook users. Through his Facebook page, he updated his 5000 'friends' about the famous bus tour. On 26 September, a week after the bus tour started, his posts on the page received more than 203 likes. All the Facebook friends of those 203 subscribers could have seen Saleshando's messages too. This translates in an audience of potentially thousands of people.

Several people commented on the posts and shared them with others. He also uploaded photographs. Among the pictures on his page was one he took with a boy in Kavimba, who was wearing a T-shirt that said 'I was Born Intelligent, Education Ruined Me'. Saleshando used this message to lash out at government education policy. Once again, the value of Facebook as a medium of communication is linked to its facility for uploading pictures, and its accessibility to a great number of people through smart phones.

The ruling party also created several Facebook pages, with each candidate using Facebook to mobilise supporters. The official party page was 'Botswana Democratic Party 2014 Elections', which bore the slogan 'Together we can strive for a better Botswana'. This page had approximately 9 000 likes. The page was coloured red and showed photos of the party at various rallies. As with other parties, the page was used to notify subscribers of the rallies and of messages delivered at the star rallies. The star rallies of 3 October 2014, in support of Gaotlhaetse Matlhabaphiri and Daniel Kwelagobe – candidates of the Molepolole South and North constituencies respectively – as well as the Mogoditshane and Kanye star rallies were captured. The president of the party was shown welcoming defectors from opposition parties. The significance of such images in political campaigning should not be underestimated.

Interestingly, the same page featured an audio-video clip of a beneficiary of the Livestock Management and Infrastructure Development (LIMID) programme, talking about how the BDP had rescued her from poverty. This was a new development in Botswana's election campaign. Government policies had never before been used explicitly to lure voters in the manner evidenced in the run-up to the 2014 elections.

The President of the Republic, Lieutenant-General Ian Khama Seretse Khama, also joined the social media bandwagon. In his opening post, he declared as follows:

Welcome to my official Facebook page, where I look forward to interacting with you as we share experiences and more importantly ways through which, together, we can move our country forward. I will from time to time be available for live chats with you. Looking forward to engaging in debates with everyone.

Within a few days of its existence, this page had received more than 19 000 likes, meaning that at least this number of people were viewing the president's posts and comments. The first post was shared by over 84 subscribers. Notably, the account omitted Khama's official title and used only his first and second name. The deliberate informality facilitated communication and removed formalities that could have hampered easy conversation and free engagement. This approach opened up dialogues between the president and Facebook subscribers.

Although the administration of the account had been outsourced to one Bridget Mavuma, the page itself created an illusion of engagement and participation. It gave the ordinary Motswana, who otherwise would not have had a platform to engage the president, a feeling of participation and activism. Crawford (2009) calls this 'delegated listening'. However, Crawford points out that this arm's-length engagement thwarts genuine communication. While this may be true, a Facebook profile creates the illusion of interaction and accessibility, which in turn creates a sense of involvement for the electorate. Whether people's concerns and opinions were actually considered or not is somewhat immaterial. The point is that mere subscription to Facebook demonstrates that the high office was beginning to appreciate the power of social media.

The timing of the creation of the Botswana Democratic Party 2014 Facebook page also shows that the party hoped to use Facebook to lure voters. This, too, is an acknowledgement of the inadequacy of traditional media, especially in reaching young people who would generally not be interested in state media. According to Kushin and Yamamoto (2010, p, 614),

Attention to social media would be positively associated with political self-efficacy, because use of media-rich social media applications for political information such as micro blogs updates and streaming live video of campaign events would give users the perceptions of increased engagement with preferred candidates or parties.

If Kushin and Yamamoto (2010) are correct, it can be argued that the presence of candidates, both parliamentary and presidential, on Facebook would have generated a fresh interest in politics. This would drive young people to seek information from other sources to enhance their understanding of politics, and to participate actively in the democratic process.

Yushin and Yamamoto (2010) also claim that studies have shown a correlation between online political participation and, firstly, political efficacy, and secondly situational political involvement. The former indicates confidence that one's effort can shape the political process, and the latter indicates the level of interest in social issues at a given time. Drawing on this theory, it appears that Facebook generated a lot of interest and confidence in the power of the vote, which resulted in a greater interest in voting. Hence Facebook can be an effective tool to aid political parties with relatively few resources to mobilise young people.

However, not only did the ruling party see social media as an efficient communication tool, they also viewed it as a threat. The contents of a highly publicised tape-recording that was leaked from a BDP strategy meeting confirm this. In the recording, a high-ranking BDP official can be heard urging members to open pseudo social media accounts, to rebut any criticism aimed at the party by private media or individual subscribers. It would seem the BDP had read an anti-BDP mood in the social media. In addition, to ensure control and perhaps to instil fear, the Botswana Police Service issued a statement warning Facebook subscribers not to commit crimes through Facebook, such as defamation, use of insulting language, and blackmail. This can be seen as a way of silencing people who were speaking out strongly against the BDP government and other politicians on social media.

The presence of radio stations and newspapers on Facebook created a partial fusion between the new media and traditional media. In particular, Gabz FM had a page titled 'Gabz FM elections 2014', which had more than 14 171 likes by September 2014. It was dedicated to the parliamentary candidates' live debates that were held across the country. The page offered participants the chance to present their ideas to the electorate, and gave subscribers a platform to give feedback to both the radio station and the candidates about the debates. This public input allowed candidates to reflect on and improve their campaigns. Most importantly, the feedback gave candidates cues about which public matters to focus on in their campaigns. Based on comments and debates among the Facebook community, candidates could alter their campaign strategies; they could also assess public opinion and perceptions about their policies.

According to Windeck (2010, p. 19), 'Thus, it can be said that political communication by the population is greater today than the mere expression of will in polls. The new technologies have promoted citizens' position to that of equal

partners in the communications structure.' The presence of Facebook therefore widened the democratic space and brought candidates closer to their potential voters. Many people who could not attend the live debates were able to see the highlights on Facebook. This merging of mainstream media and new media has profoundly improved access to political information.

However, it is crucial to point out that only private radio stations rose to the occasion in terms of embracing social media, especially Facebook. The state media failed to keep pace with the new tools of political communication. Perhaps one would have expected the BDP government to use Radio Botswana and Botswana Television vigorously and in all ways possible, including Facebook, to gain leverage against the Gabz FM countrywide debates, which the BDP had shunned and vowed not to participate in. But neither Radio Botswana nor Botswana Television had official Facebook pages. If such pages had existed, they might have provided an avenue through which the government could counter opposition and advertise government programmes to lure voters.

In hindsight, however, this seemingly odd gap is not all that surprising. The listenership of Radio Botswana consists mostly of aged voters, who rarely if ever access Facebook – or even have access to the internet. Nevertheless, we observe an oversight and lack of diligence and innovativeness on the part of the BDP government, which failed to use resources (including state media) at its disposal to counter the opposition and redirect the many young and middle-aged voters' attention to government programmes and the ruling party's electoral promises.

That said, we acknowledge the existence of a government Facebook page titled 'BWGOVERNMENT'. The page provides updates about government programmes and policies, as well as any information that the government needs to impart to the nation. Although it was not explicitly set up for active political campaigning, this page could be seen as partly an attempt by the government to counter opposition on Facebook. Its efficacy was, however, limited by its formal appearance. It lacks the vibrancy of opposition pages, and in this regard failed to measure up to the opposition's efforts.

Apart from the unbalanced coverage by state media of campaign rallies and events, intended to side-line opposition parties, the only other strategy that government employed just before the elections was the airing of a documentary on 'Political Tolerance'. It was aired on Botswana Television and portrayed the UDC as politically intolerant. This followed a chaotic invasion of the pitch by angry UDC supporters, who wanted to prevent a BDP representative from speaking at the memorial service held for the late Gomolemo Motswaledi.

The documentary first featured a brief historical background of Botswana as a nation acclaimed for its political tolerance and stability under the auspices of BDP governments. Then followed several interviews with political commentators

and analysts on political (in)tolerance, punctuated by a clip of UDC supporters charging towards the podium, and the BDP representative being whisked away for his own safety. Evidently the BDP government sought to capitalise on the incident to discredit the UDC in the eyes of voters, while presenting the BDP as a politically tolerant party. Whether the strategy worked or not is somewhat irrelevant. The point is that the BDP government failed to use its control of the state media in more innovative ways, such as reaching out to young voters and also in countering the opposition.

Print media also established a presence on Facebook. Newspapers, including the state-owned *Daily News*, created accounts and news blogs to disseminate the news. The private newspapers *Mmegi*, *Gazette*, and *The Voice* all had their own blogs, in which news that appeared in print was also shared on Facebook. This allowed some live coverage – which had previously been the preserve of broadcast media. People's access to the daily news was expanded. Most importantly, journalists were now able to report events as they unfolded, providing immediate information and updates on important political matters.

Kushin and Yamamoto (2010, p. 614) convincingly write that

Attention to social media would also be positively associated with situational political involvement, because social media offers users new channels for political information. With social media, young adults can rely on friends and the internet for political news rather than merely receiving political information from traditional news media sources. Users can experience politics on a more familiar, personal level through the postings of friends and acquaintances. Such experiences would make news more accessible, bringing it into the daily lives of young adults and affecting their interest in political situations.

This comment is particularly important given the continued declining public confidence in traditional media, both private and public, caused by the drop in quality of news reporting.

Facebook subscribers can form groups based on common interests, and can then interact as a group. Various unofficial groups related to Botswana politics were visible on Facebook. One that had a huge number of subscribers was called 'There is no alternative: an unofficial BDP group'; it had 29 974 members as of September 2014. Formed to counterbalance the BMD during its nascent stages, this group was one of the most animated in the run-up to the 2014 elections. The opposition and ruling parties' sympathisers clashed in debates about various issues pertaining to the elections. Such debates centred around party manifestos

and the suitability of candidates for office. The group's biggest rival was called 'Umbrella for Democratic Change', which also had a huge following of more than 24 000 members.

Several other groups were also visible, including 'Change-Moono Generation', 'BMD Aspirations of the People Platform', 'Botswana Congress Party', 'Botswana National Front', 'Umbrella party', 'President Duma Boko for Gaborone Bonnington North 2014', 'Perspective: Anchoring BMD's Aspirations' and 'Botswana National Front Group'. These groups facilitated engagement and debate among citizens about the various parties, candidates, and campaign strategies.

The groups gave an ordinary Motswana the opportunity to share his or her opinions and benefit from learning about the ideas and perspectives of other people. Most importantly, the groups were able to counteract ideas or commentaries not well presented by the traditional media. Essentially they acted as supplements to the traditional media. In view of this, Kushin and Yamamoto (2010) write that

Social media create venues where users can express political views and interact with others. Political use of interactive internet features has been shown to have a greater impact on gains in political information efficacy for young adults than simple unidirectional internet content. This suggests that 'accomplishing interactivity on a web site offers youth a means to engage democracy' (Tedesco, 2007, p. 1191).

(Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010, p. 615)

The new media sparked debates on many issues that were critical in the 2014 general elections. As already mentioned, these intense debates between subscribers enhanced people's political knowledge, and stimulated a wider interest in politics. Interactions on Facebook strengthened the relationship between voters and candidates. Vergeer et al. (2011) claim that Facebook posts move beyond purely political communication to include messages about candidates' personal experiences and activities that do not necessarily involve politics. Vergeer et al. (2011, p. 5) further state that

through these messages people get some insight into private life and interests of a politician. The assumption is that, by doing so, politicians create a stronger bond with people, going beyond the professional one, thus closing psychological distance between politicians and citizens.

This strategy also affects voting decisions. Because it is candidate-centred, voters tend to develop a strong attachment to a candidate rather than his or her party, resulting in a weaker identification with the party. This has implications for voter behaviour and could weaken partisan voting in Botswana; it could also draw previously unaffiliated voters to the polls. Indeed, the success of the opposition in areas that were traditionally BDP strongholds could partly be a result of this tactic. Opposition candidates' visibility on Facebook lured unaffiliated voters to their fold.

The use of new campaign strategies, tailor-made to suit the various constituents, evoked excitement and euphoria at a level never seen before in the history of Botswana elections. This was largely a result of the intense competition that arose through the greater availability of resources for all political parties. For the first time in Botswana politics, the opposition was visible across the country, thanks to funds sourced from sympathisers. The UDC, partly because it had brought together the resources of three cooperating parties, had an edge over the BCP. This access to resources, though still limited, allowed the opposition to strongly challenge the BDP. The use of social media demonstrated that with resources and equal access to media, the opposition could indeed challenge the ruling BDP.

## CONCLUSION

It is apparent that Botswana's 2014 elections were caught up in a social media frenzy. Political parties and individual candidates alike sought to exploit the opportunity presented by social media to woo voters to their fold. Similarly, to expand their reach and amplify their voices, traditional media joined the Facebook hype, a move that legitimised communication through social media.

Most importantly, social media have widened access to political information, and have ensured that parties compete at a lower cost than was previously possible. The use of social media in Botswana has made information on elections available to the public at a lower price, and has effectively democratised electoral competition by ensuring that domination by the BDP state media does not simply leave opposition parties out of the running. However, although social media dominated the 2014 general election campaigns, it has not entirely phased out the utility of freedom squares. Political parties utilised social media to complement and augment these political rallies, as a way of reaching out to young people.

In light of the discussion presented in this paper, there can be little doubt that the advent of social media has added a new dimension to Botswana politics. However, the causal relationship between Facebook and voting behaviour in Botswana has yet to be studied in depth.

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