Bridgette Bugalo

The use of social media in political campaigns

As the advent of social media transforms communication patterns, political campaigns have seen opportunity. In as much as radio and television revolutionised the “coffee houses” public sphere, political figures have attached significance to the power of social media in reaching the masses during a campaign. Social media has become a 21st century innovation for political party contestants.

Despite the challenges of social media, political campaigners can now interact directly with the electorate. Candidates are using social media to share information and politics is almost taking over the cyberspace whereas campaign messages are defeating territorial boundaries.

The new media landscape has become a place of discourse and a public sphere to share ideas, goals, accomplishments, footage on milestones and engaging users, adding a human touch to campaigns.

The paper seeks to explore the use of social media such as twitter and Facebook in political campaigns showing how candidates and their parties have taken advantage of the new media.

Political campaigns here refer to forms of organised effort seeking to influence the decision making process within a specific group called the electorate. Campaigns often carry a message containing ideas that the candidate wants to share with the voters. Campaign messages often consist of talking points particularly on policy issues; these usually are a
summary of the campaign’s main ideas and are repeated frequently in order to create a lasting impression with the voters.

The paper will explore the questions: Who utilizes the platforms to campaign? How do they do it? Does it work to their advantage or it kills their reputation? Are their likes and followers increasing?

**Defining social media**

Social media is a term used to refer to online based or electronic communication platforms. It includes web and mobile-based technologies which are used to turn communication into interactive dialogue among communities, and individuals.

Social media has rigorously exploded as an online discourse centre where various people including the electorate and the candidate create content, share it, retweet it and network at an extraordinary rate.

Particularly with reference to Facebook and Twitter, a user’s followers, page likes and friends often determine the popularity of the user. With politics, popularity means everything. A single post by a political leader or an opinion leader has the power to influence the electorate to vote against a candidate and equally influence the electorate to vote for a candidate.

The paper’s hypothesis is that political leaders who are on Facebook and Twitter have a wider active audience and therefore their campaign reaches the multitudes.

According to [www.socialbakers.com](http://www.socialbakers.com) South Africa has 5.352 900 Facebook users, 1.1 million Twitter users generating 115 000 tweets per
month. However Facebook statistics in Zimbabwe have still not been documented but internet users are above 1.445 717.

**New Media and the Candidates**

Demonstrating clearly the importance of internet political campaigning, United States of America president Barack Obama’s presidential campaign relied profoundly on social media, and new media channels to engage voters, recruit campaign volunteers, and raise campaign funds. Social media helped reach the younger population who are often thought of as passive in political matters. Likewise, Zimbabwean and South African politicians have embraced social media.

This section looks at the politicians who are using these sites to spearhead their campaign keeping their supporters, gaining political mileage and luring potential supporters.

**Zuma, Zille and Malema**

The Twitter account @presidencyza is an official page for South African president Jacob Zuma. The account with more than 157 223 followers is politically driven and set to portray Zuma in good light, showing his updates on various matters. The account seeks to support and praise Zuma for the work that he is doing for the communities and the country. For instance since the Marikana disaster, posts have shown that government under the leadership of Zuma is supporting victims of the Marikana tragedy. “Government will continue to maintain preserve in that area until all families have been provided with necessary support and assistance,” “The
president did go to the shooting site in Marikana”. Some posts direct users to Zuma’s official website [www.thepresidency.gov.za](http://www.thepresidency.gov.za) where press statements are delivered for public interest. Although he has stood ground to influence people into supporting him, trending hashtags such as #marikana have shown tweets of defiance saying Zuma applied apartheid tactics.

Democratic Alliance (DA) leader HellenZille @HelenZille whose Twitter bio reads –“Western Cape Premier and Leader of South Africa’s official opposition party, the Democratic Alliance,” clearly highlights the stance of engaging in an online campaign where followers follow her because of her twitter bio.

The DA leader who has embraced social media in her strategy to campaign has 178119 followers. She follows 13 568. However, although her campaign strategy seems to be working to her advantage, her tweets have sometimes caused controversy and showed how Twitter could spoil the good campaign. For instance, Zille, in March this year experienced criticism over a tweet she posted about Eastern Cape pupils who were travelled to Western Cape referring to them as “refugees” it was then that her and the DA party were labeled as racist. The media did not spare her and stories were retweeted, shared, blogged to a point where she tried to defend herself on the same site that had angered her supporters. Her party also has a website whose campaign message is on creating employment for the people thus making it a suitable campaign tool as a larger percentage consists of the unemployed.
The ex ANC Youth League leader Julius Malema has also embraced this platform to enhance his political standing. The account delivers campaign messages from Malema citing that there is no room for surrender. Within a week, the account has received over 2 000 followers spiraling from 218 600 to 220 823. The account whose bio reads “a revolutionary activist and fighter for the economic emancipation of South Africa uses the hashtag #asijiki to spearhead a campaign against the Marikana disaster. Tweets such as “CEO’s: Lonmin R24m, Gold Fields R 32.6m and Anglo Platinum R21.5m a year while mine worker earns less than R70.000 a year. SA for you, let's talk,” “Addressing mining revolution at Goldfields Drientfontein, mining revolution is in motion #asijiki,” have gained tremendous support with some tweets getting about 216 retweets and the hashtag #asijiki trending in South Africa.

Zimbabwe

In an article titled, A new breed of techno-savvy politicians, published on Sunday 16 January 2011, The Standard, a Zimbabwean newspaper said with the growth of internet penetration and the advent of mobile internet access in Zimbabwe, observers maintain that social networking may one day define the next Zimbabwean leader.

In Zimbabwean politics, with most Zimbabweans living out of the country, the country’s political parties have extended to outside its borders while the advent of new media has come as a blessing complementing their existing structures.

The Mthwakazi Liberation Front (MLF)
The Zimbabwean political party which was launched in Bulawayo’s Stanley Hall on 27 December 2010 uses its Facebook page, MLF Mthwakazi, to spearhead its campaign, aware that its target audience which includes most of the people who left Zimbabwe during the 1983 genocide and during the economic mayhem are online users.

Van Zoonen (2002) stipulates that for such purposes, the internet has been celebrated as a media for the subaltern.

The party operating from South Africa advocates for secession as a solution in Zimbabwe. Its posts have an agenda to influence and acquire more friends on Facebook so that the message for secession reaches friends of friends.

**The Movement for Democratic Change**

The party led by Welshman Ncube has more party leaders engaging in Twitter with the likes of Senator David Coltart, suspended Gwanda mayor Lionel DeNecker, youth secretary general Discent Bajila, party secretary general Priscilla Mishairambwi Mushonga, party spokesperson Nhlanhla Dube. These political figures stand in as political activists spearheading the campaign for their party president. Political campaigns are seen taking a twist from door to door to online conversations where opinion leaders such as the listed above spread the message whose context is “going green”, “the green revolution”. The party also utilizes twitter @MDCPARTY where it releases press statements promoting the party’s leader citing what he has done, where and when.

Research suggests that websites matter, particularly as a means to learn about the candidate and as an impression builder about the candidate
(Trammell et al. 2006). In this light it is important to note that the MDC
www.mdczim.net and the MDC-T both have websites updating the public
about their stance and what they do, making information available.

**Movement for Democratic Change (Morgan Tsvangirai)**

@mdczimbabwe publicizes events line up, talks about arrests of party
members which they know will arouse sympathy and increase supporters.

The Twitter account sites a link to its website www.mdc.co.zw which has a
section clearly saying “get involved, register to vote, spread the word, and
contribute to change. The websites also has links to its Facebook, Twitter,
YouTube and Flicker and a webmail service.

**Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF)**

Although social media enhances political campaigns, when it faces
resentment from potential supporters, trust is equally lost. This becomes a
major drawback, as it is difficult to measure the authenticity of a political
party on these networks. For instance, the twitter account @zanu_PF has
faced criticism with people saying the account is a fake as posts seem to
contradict the party’s norms. The account has 585 followers.

**Negativity on the Internet, killing reputation?**

The paper has examined and discussed most of the positive ways in which
candidates have utilized social media. However, negative aspects of social
media include situations where satirical accounts are created as a form of
parody to the actual political party or candidate. For instance, a Facebook
account was created in the name of MDC secretary general Moses Mzila
Ndlovu and later, a statement was released by the party’s youth secretary
genera citing that the account was fake. Trending negative articles can lead to loss of faith from supporters who trust the Internet.

**What this means**

Political campaign methods have changed but not entirely. Campaigns have always been about persuading the public, in the past they were distant with the masses not entirely involved but social media has provided a platform to question leaders such that the electorate is no longer a passive audience waiting to vote.

However, not all politicians understand social media use in political campaign but as communication patterns change, they will realise that it is now difficult to gather a crowd under the shade or halls and a lot easier to create a Twitter or Facebook page for discussions.

**References/ Bibliography**


Trammell, D. et al. (2006). *Evolution of online campaigning*


[www.thestandard.co.zw](http://www.thestandard.co.zw) accessed 10/09/2012.