

Media Literacy, Access and Political Participation among South African Black Youth: A Study of North-West University, Mafikeng Campus

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ABSTRACT This study explores the extent of media access and literacy of the black students of the North-West University, Mafikeng Campus, and the impact of these factors on the students' knowledge of and attitude towards politics. Through questionnaires and interview guides, data was obtained from 232 respondents and 22 interviewees, respectively. The Internet (n=211; 90.9%) is accessible to the students when they are on the university campus while television (n= 137; 59.1%) and radio (n=53; 22.8%) are accessible outside the university. The respondents' knowledge of South African politics gained through the news media is significantly associated with their attitude to the nation's politics ($X^2 = 9.900$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.005$) and their readiness to participate in South African politics ($X^2 = 5.889$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.005$). However, respondents demonstrated political apathy, which they attributed to bad leadership.

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that the mass media are massively significant and indispensable for modern democracy to thrive, especially in the modern age when social networks have become a important feature of daily life, where people are able to participate online and share information more effectively as a result of integration of conventional and digital media platforms (Bastos 2014; Burkell et al. 2014). Democracy is a system of government where all citizens believe that ideas and opinions must be freely exchanged in a manner that truth will eventually triumph over falsehood, and where, through free exchange of such ideas, areas of compromise shall be clearly established (Parikh and Pahad 2011). It encourages free participation in the state affairs by all who are constitutionally qualified and willing to

participate. The foregoing descriptions mean that the sole ingredients of modern democracy are active participation and free exchange of ideas by the citizens; and without effective communication systems, where every citizen is connected and well informed, a democratic project is fated to fail. As Dimitrova et al. (2014: 98) argue, "one of the primary functions of news media in a democratic society is to inform its citizens," and this cardinal function becomes more crucial during election campaigns when citizens need to know more about the candidates they want to vote for, and the political manifestoes of the various political parties. Therefore, active political participation and engagement (Vakaoti and Mishra-Vakaoti 2015) can only be achieved when citizens have functional media skills and literacy, and where the communication media are easily accessible to allow free interaction, political discussion (Shim et al. 2015; You et al. 2015) and information sharing. Various scholars (for example, Moore 2002; Onumah 2011; Al-Kandari and Hasan 2012; Campbell and Kwak 2012; Olorunisola and Martin 2012; Khamis 2013; Dimitrova et al. 2014), realizing the role of the mass media in any modern democracy, have worked on the correlation between citizens' access to the communication media and level of media literacy on the one hand, and their level of political partici-

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pation and social engagements, on the other hand. Van Rensburg (2012), for instance, conducted a study to examine how three African countries—South Africa, Kenya and Zambia—used the Internet for democratic advancements. The researcher submits that though evidence of the integration of Internet usage in the South African democratic project has demonstrated a huge possibility for the nation to become a model for other African nations; simultaneously the ruling party, who is desperate to limit press freedom, always puts pressure on the traditional media. This phenomenon has a serious implication for the political success of South Africa.

South Africa is one of the biggest democracies in Africa, but with a relatively young democracy, which started with the first democratic, non-racial election in 1994 (Bosch 2013) after the end of the apartheid regime. These facts make her a nation whose democratic project would always attract global attention. Like other African countries, South Africa, since 1994, has been confronted with a number of political and social challenges “in engendering ‘nation-building’ and promoting democratic processes that takes root at civil society level” (Cottle and Mugha Rai 2008: 344). Citing Heller (2009), Beall et al. (2005), and Lieres (2005), Tsarwe (2014) observe that in South Africa’s post-1994 transition to multicultural democracy, vast majority of the citizens enjoy partial opportunities for political participation, their rights and freedoms are massively devoid of fundamental principle of citizenship, while the visibly overwhelming power of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) party effectively chokes what is supposed to be a truly free and participatory environment as guaranteed by the nation’s constitution. Citing another researcher (for example, Wasserman 2010), Tsarwe (2014: 289) further highlights the progressive dominance of privileged groups over historically disempowered, apartheid-stricken groups (mostly the blacks), through strategic partnerships between elites in the post-apartheid era, describing South Africa’s transition to democracy as an “elite continuity.” One of the fundamental consequences of the foregoing challenges is the imperativeness of expanding the project of media education in order to enhance equal access to the communication media in a manner that would empower disadvantaged groups, especially at the grassroots, and reverse the trend of declining political participation. Re-

ally, the South African government seems to be conscious of these challenges, and has consequently intensified efforts on media literacy education and access in order to encourage civic awareness and political participation among the citizens (Saleh 2012).

However, the degree to which the campaign and efforts towards enhancement of media literacy education and access among the South African citizens have generated the desired results, especially at the grassroots level, which is always susceptible to marginalization by media planners and professionals as the case in Nigeria (Moemeka 2009), requires further investigation. This paper, therefore, investigated the extent of media literacy, and media access by the black youth in the South African sub-urban settings, and the impact of these phenomena on the youth’s knowledge of South African politics, the level of their interest in the nation’s political affairs in general, and their readiness to participate in South African politics. The study was conducted among students of the North-West University, Mafikeng Campus with specific focus on the black students. The questions that guided these objectives are:

- (1) *What is the extent of media access and literacy among the black students of North-West University?*
- (2) *To what extent has the level of media access by the students influenced their knowledge of South African politics?*
- (3) *What is the influence of students’ knowledge of South African politics on their attitude to, and readiness to, participate in South African Politics?*

Without doubt, the youth have remained fundamental components of the South African social struggle and political emancipation. Bosch (2013), for instance, explained that during the 1970s and the 1980s, South African black youth played significant roles in the anti-apartheid protest as activists usually targeted schools and universities to recruit youth for political action, mobilization and protest against the oppressive authority and anti-blacks policies. However, citing Deegan, Bosch (2013: 120) conceded, “in the post-apartheid era, the status of black youth political participation has been very different, with a general perception that the black youth are generally politically apathetic and driven more by consumerism than a desire for activism or citizenship”. The foregoing background

justifies the reason for selecting the black students of the North-West University for this study. The population represents typical South African black youth, who are believed to be active media users, and have critical stakes in the politics and democratic project of South Africa. Mafikeng Campus of the North-West University is selected as the geographic focus for this study because, in the South African demographic composition, Mmabatho, the community where the Mafikeng Campus of the University is located, represents the less-urban component of the country.

Literature Review

Media Literacy, Media Access and Political Participation

Media literacy has become a major issue of discourse in the contemporary society especially with growing influence of news media on modern democracy. The concept of media literacy is considered so critical that it has attracted different definitions by different scholars. Siverblatt and Eliceiri (1997: 48) describe media literacy as, “a critical thinking skill that enables audiences to decipher the information that they receive through the channels of mass communications and empowers them to develop independent judgments about media content”. In the view of Sholle and Denski (1995), media literacy must be understood as a critical, political, social and cultural practice. The definition given by Adams and Hamm (2001:33) seems to be more comprehensive, and descriptive. According to them, “media literacy may be thought of as the ability to create personal meaning from the visual and verbal symbols we take in every day from television, advertising, film, and digital media. It is more than inviting students to simply decode information. They must be critical thinkers who can understand and produce in the media culture swirling around them”.

The implication of the foregoing descriptions of media literacy is that it has to do with comprehension and utilization of media messages, gratification and satisfaction with how the media operate, construct meanings, and represent social realities. That is, citizens must not only understand the media messages, they must also be able to interpret the messages and act appropriately in manners that enhance their social and

political engagements. Both media literacy and media access are related, as the concept of access is also located in the skills of media literacy. If an individual lacks the basic media literacy skills, he may not be able to access the media even if the media are accessible. For instance, Lee and So (2014) citing different researcher (Brown 1998; Lee 2010; *Media Literacy Week* 2010; Potter 2010) describe media literacy as a concept that involves different skills. It is the ability of an individual to access media contents, understand and analyze media messages, make critical assessment of the messages and construct diverse meanings from different communication contexts. This overlapping between media literacy and access is further highlighted in the definition by Ofcom (2006) as cited by Sourbati (2009: 248) that media literacy is “the ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts”. This definition suggests that media literacy is multifaceted and multi-tasking. It encompasses media literacy, and media literacy in itself involves “understanding of what each platform and device is capable of and how to use its functions...and requires practical skills in information seeking... and critical skills in analyzing and evaluating information”. Media literacy and access are more than getting meaning from the media message; they also involve evaluating the meanings and generating diverse interpretations of the media messages.

As Sidekli (2013) explains, media literacy is a curial skill that must be given to children right from the early stage of their education as this would enable them to interact effectively with the news media and construct meaningful and functional interpretations of media contents. In contemporary society with rapid development and diffusion of new media through digital technologies, the media literacy experience of the youth has become diverse, swift and rich (Thorne-Wallington 2013). As Price (2013:219) rightly observes, “the impact of social and digital media in political discussions and activities is often assessed in terms of either its utopian or dystopian potential.” This means that with speedy pervasiveness of these news media (both, the conventional and the digital media), the youth are believed to have access to a wide range of media messages, both positive and negative, and the nature of the media messages to which the youth are exposed would largely shape their social and political orientation.

The concept media access, especially in terms of content creation, may be viewed from the lenses of the two media genres—the traditional mass media (Radio, Television and Print Media) and the social media (operating on the Web 2.0 platforms for example, *Facebook*, blogs, *Twitter*, *Wikis*, *RSS*). The level of the citizens' access to the traditional media is oftentimes controlled and limited as a result of various complexities such as “stringent laws, monopolistic ownership, and sometimes, the threat of brute force” (Kaul 2012: 52), political influence, and the need to survive stiff competitions especially in a profit-driven economy. Government agencies always censor and regulate what the state-owned media houses give to the public, while media organizations generally perform the gate-keeping roles of monitoring the amount and nature of the information that go to the media content (Donohew 2001; Shoemaker et al. 2001; McKain 2005; Paul and Elder 2006). Social, political and economic status, in most cases, determines whose voice and ideas are allowed access to the traditional media platforms. This restriction has heightened the clamor for community radio systems (Ojebode 2009; Moemeka 2009; Myers 2011; Tsarwe 2014) where the citizens, especially at the grassroots, irrespective of their social, educational, economic or political status, will be able to be part of news creation and through this platform participate in political and economic activities of their communities and the nation at large. However, the emergence of digital media has democratized media access. The Internet has provided almost unrestricted access and platforms for the citizens to consume and even create media contents. Youth now use their cell phones—also termed a *hybrid medium* (Wei 2008: 36)—in several ways ranging from mass communication to entertainment (Aoki and Downes 2003; Wei 2008; Balakrishnan and Raj 2012; Velghe 2012). In several parts of the world, especially in Arab and Asia, there have been cases where youth actively used the social media (for example, *Twitter*, *Facebook*, and blogs) to initiate, mobilize and sustain political struggles and participation (Al-Kandari and Hasan 2012; Chatora 2012; Bosch 2013).

Political participation is a multifaceted concept that involves diverse activities ranging from attending political rallies, political meetings, participating in political debates to voting. It in-

volves the various means through which citizens of a given social group articulate their political ideologies and make their contributions to the whole political system. Therefore, when the citizens are empowered to be exposed to the mass media and interpret the media messages appropriately, their level of political participation is believed to be enhanced. They would be able to exchange information about political parties and their political agenda, know more about the political actors, and learn new political behaviors that would enable them to take appropriate decisions especially during elections. As Trappel and Maniglio (2009: 169) explain, “modern democracy and the mass media are intrinsically related. In modern democracies the mass media are the link between those who govern and those who are governed”. This means that with the mass media and especially with the emergence of the social media and the switch to Web 2.0 (Vesnic-Alujevic 2012), the wide gulf that would have existed between the people and their political representatives in modern democracy has been closed or significantly reduced.

Theoretical Framework

Democratic-Participant Media Theory

This study is anchored on the Democratic-Participant Media Theory, which prescribes the reorganization of the media system in such a way that citizens would have better control of, and more access to the media. The theory calls for a social framework that accommodates true democratization of the media structure that is substantially free from the conventional bureaucracy, commercialization and professional control. The Democratic-Participant theory considers the public media system (especially the public broadcasting) as being extremely elitist, too urban, too rigid in structure, highly susceptible to the domination and manipulation of the elite, and extremely subjected to professional dogma at the expense of social responsibilities of the mass media. Therefore, the theory prescribes a new media system that gives priority to needs, and aspirations of the mass audience, especially people at the grassroots, who have been persistently marginalized by the media structure under the elitist media system created by libertarian and social responsibility principles. It calls for decentralization and pluralism in the media

sector where communication order would be participatory and masses-centered instead of being monopolistic and elitist. In essence, the theory calls for a grassroots media system—perhaps community radio system (Tsarwe 2014)—that allows the citizens to participate fully in the democratic project (Folarin 1998; McQuail 2007; Ojebode and Ojebuyi 2013).

The theory is a reaction to the public disappointment with the failure of both, Libertarian and Social Responsibility theories to deliver the social benefit expected of them (see Folarin 1998; Severin and Tankard (Jnr) 2001; Watson 2003; Sambe 2005; McQuail 2007; Baran and Davis 2009). The Libertarian theory on the one hand encourages heavy commercialization and monopolization of privately owned media house. On the other hand, the Social Responsibility theory entrenches a phenomenon of centralism and bureaucratization of the broadcast institutions.

The focus of this study is on the relationship between media literacy and access on the one hand and citizens' level of participation in the democratic process of the state on the other hand. This theory, therefore, is considered relevant to this study because it supports media access and control by mass audience through democratization of the media system ultimately to encourage the citizens to participate in the state affairs.

METHODOLOGY

Two categories of data—quantitative and qualitative—were collected to provide answers to the research questions raised in this study. The study draws quantitative data through a survey conducted among the black students of North-West University, Mafikeng Campus, South Africa. The survey questionnaire was administered to 232 students between 15 and 30 years. The sample was selected through stratified and convenience sampling techniques. Stratified sampling was used in order to ensure that every faculty in the University was represented in the sample. One hundred and eighteen (50.9%) of the respondents were male, while 114 (49.1%) were female. Majority (85.8%) of the respondents was aged between 19 and 25. The qualitative data was collected through structured interviews conducted with 22 students of the University. The interviewees were selected through a convenience sampling technique. The qualitative

data was used to complement the discussion of the phenomenon under investigation. Only individuals, who were black students of the University, and were citizens of South Africa, were selected for the study because these two factors constituted core variables of the study. The researchers did not employ the knowledge or attitude rating scale; students' level of knowledge of, and attitude to, South African politics are respondent-rated. This may constitute a limitation to the study; yet, findings of the study have significant implications for South African democratic project and youth involvement.

FINDINGS

Findings in this study are structured along the three research questions constructed for the study. The findings are presented as follows:

Research Question 1: *What is the extent of media access and literacy among the black students of North-West University?*

The objectives of this research question are to establish the respondents' patterns of media access and the extent to which the respondents have access to the news media, and to investigate respondents' level of media literacy. Findings as presented in Tables 1, 2 and 3 take care of these objectives.

Table 1 shows that social media (which are Internet-based operating on the Web 2.0 platforms for example, *Facebook*, blogs, *Twitter*, *Wikis*, *RSS*) is the most accessible media type to the students ($n=211$; 90.9%) when they are on the University campus. This is followed by radio ($n=13$; 5.6%), while television ($n=6$; 2.6%) is the least accessible news media on the University campus.

As shown in Table 1, the most accessible news media to the students when they are outside the University campus is television ($n=137$; 59.1%), while radio is the next accessible news media ($n=53$; 22.8%). The print media (newspaper/magazine) is the least accessible news media to the students whenever they are out of the University campus.

Table 2 presents respondents' extent of access to news media (conventional and digital media). Fifty-three (22.8%) of the respondents described their level access to the conventional media as being excellent, while 124 (53.4%) said their level of access to the digital media is excellent. On the other hand, 142 (61.2%) respondents

Table 1: Respondents' pattern of access to news media

<i>Pattern of Media Access while on the University Campus</i>	<i>News media</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
	Radio	13	5.6
	Television	6	2.6
	Newspaper/ Magazine	2	0.9
	Digital Media (Internet-based media)	211	90.9
	Total	232	100.0
<i>Pattern of Media Access while not on the University Campus</i>	Radio	53	22.8
	Television	137	59.1
	Newspaper/ Magazine	9	3.9
	Digital Media (Internet-based media)	29	12.5
	No Response	4	1.7
	Total	232	100.0

Table 2: Respondents' extent of access to news media

<i>Media type</i>	<i>Response</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
<i>Conventional Media (Radio, Television, Newspaper/Magazine)</i>	Excellent	53	22.8
	Good	142	61.2
	Average	34	14.7
	Poor	3	1.3
	Total	232	100.0
<i>Social Media (Twitter, Facebook, Blogs, etc.)</i>	Excellent	124	53.4
	Good	84	36.2
	Average	21	9.1
	Poor	3	1.3
	Total	232	100.0

described their level of access to the old media as being good, while 84 (36.2%) respondents claimed that their level access to the digital media was good. On the whole, the respondents' access to the old media at the above average level is eighty four percent, while their access to the digital media at above average level is 89.6 percent.

In order to test the respondents' level of media literacy, the researchers constructed two propositions and asked the respondents to determine whether each of the statements is true or false. Table 3 shows these propositions and responses given by the respondents.

As shown in Table 3, only 75 (32.3%) respondents considered to be true the proposition that the government-owned media, rather than the private media, are likely to give a more accurate, credible, fair and independent report on corrupt practices by government officials. On the other hand, majority of the respondents (n=157; 67.7%) were able to detect that the statement is not true.

Table 3 further shows that majority of the respondents have high media literacy as overwhelming majority of the respondents (n= 201; 86.6%) submitted that propaganda (half truth) is a common feature of political contents of mass

Table 3: Respondents' level of media literacy

<i>Proposition</i>	<i>Response</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
(1) When it comes to reporting corrupt practices and other vices by government officials, audience are likely to get a more accurate, credible fair and independent version of the story from government-owned media organizations rather than from the private media.	True	75	32.3
	False	157	67.7
	Total	232	100.0
(2) Propaganda (half-truth) is a common feature of political contents of mass media.	True	201	86.6
	False	30	12.9
	No Response	1	.4
	Total	232	100.0

media. Only 30 (12.9%) of the respondents did not consider the statement to be true.

Research Question 2: *To what extent has the level of media access by the students influenced their knowledge of South African politics?*

The core objective here is to seek the respondents' opinions as to how much knowledge of South African politics they have gained through the news media. Table 4 presents the finding.

Table 4: Extent to which students' level of access to the news media has influenced their knowledge of South African politics

Response	Frequency	Percentage
To a great extent	176	75.9
To a low extent	50	21.6
To no extent	5	2.2
No response		1.4
Total	232	100.0

Access to the news media has apparently enhanced the respondents' knowledge of South African politics as findings show in Table 4. One hundred and seventy-six of the respondents (75.9%) claimed that their level of access to the news media improved, to a large extent, their knowledge of South African politics. Only 50 (21.6%) of the respondents indicated that their access to news media had little influence on their knowledge of South African politics while just five (2.2%) of the respondents believed that their access to social media did not really contribute to their knowledge of South African politics.

Research Question 3: *What is the influence of students' knowledge of South African politics on their attitude to, and readiness to, participate in South African Politics?*

In order to answer the research question 3, the researchers constructed two null hypotheses:

Null Hypothesis 1: Knowledge of South African politics gained by students through the news media has no significant relationship with their attitude to South African politics.

Null Hypothesis 2: Knowledge of South African politics gained by students through the news media has no significant relationship with their readiness to participate in South African politics.

The aim here is to establish how the knowledge of South African politics that the respon-

dents gained through the news media has influenced their attitudes towards political affairs of South Africa, and their readiness to participate in the nation's politics. Findings are presented in Tables 5, 6, 7 and 8. Besides, qualitative data from the structured interviews are used to probe the reasons for students' attitudes to the political affairs of the country.

Findings as presented in Table 5 show that the respondents' attitude to South African politics is generally negative. Most of the respondents (n= 186; 80.2%) expressed a negative attitude to their country's politics, while only 46 (19.8%) indicated a positive attitude to the nation's political affairs.

Table 5: Respondents' attitudes to South African politics

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Positive	46	19.8
Negative	186	80.2
Total	232	100.0

In order to determine the reasons for the negative attitude of the respondents, the researchers used the qualitative data from the structured interviews. Almost all of the interviewees expressed negative attitudes to South African politics, while consensus among them is that South African politics is replete with corruption, and the leaders are politically inept and grossly self-ish. For instance, one interviewee (Tebogo, a Master's student in the Department of Management and Public Administration) submitted, "*politics in South Africa is not benefitting the masses. The politicians are selfish and only they benefit from the politics*". Another interviewee (Segametsi, a 400-level student of Agricultural Economics and Extension) reacted sharply and summed his thoughts thus, "*My attitude is negative. Our South African politics is corrupt; it lacks ethics and morals*". Tihobetsare, a second-year student in the Faculty of Commerce and Administration, sounded worried and ominous in his reaction: "*What is currently happening at the Parliament makes me worry about our economy because investors might terminate on going contract or projects... Our political leaders pursue personal interest instead of serving the people*", he said.

As shown in Table 6, only one of every five respondents (17.2%) was ready to participate in

South African politics. This is an indication of a high level of political apathy among the respondents. In order to establish the relationship between respondents' knowledge of South African politics and their attitude to, and readiness to take part in the political activities of their country, the researchers employed cross-tabulations and chi-square tests as presented in Tables 7 and 8.

Table 6: Respondents' readiness to participate in South African politics

<i>Ready</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Yes	40	17.2
No	192	82.8
Total	232	100.0

As shown in the cross-tabulation (Table 7), the respondents' knowledge of South African politics gained through the news media is significantly associated with their attitude to the nation's politics ($\chi^2 = 9.900$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.005$). The researchers, therefore, reject the null hypothesis 1 and conclude that the respondents' knowledge of South African politics through the news media and their attitudes to South African

politics are significantly related. Respondents who claimed to have good (above average) knowledge expressed more positive attitudes compared to those who confessed to have poor (below average) knowledge (26.1% versus 11.2%). However, the respondents' level of positive attitude to South African politics is generally low (19.8%) compared to the level of negative attitude (80.2%).

The cross-tabulation (Table 8) shows that respondents' knowledge of South African politics gained through the news media is significantly associated with their readiness to participate in South African politics ($\chi^2 = 5.889$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.005$). The implication here is that the Null Hypothesis 2 is invalid. Respondents with good (above average) knowledge demonstrated higher readiness (22.4%) to participate in South African politics compared with the level of readiness (10.2%) of those with poor (below average) knowledge. However, respondents' level of readiness to participate in South African politics is generally low (17.2%) compared to their level of unwillingness (82.8%) to participate in the nation's politics.

Table 7: Relationship between respondents' knowledge of South African politics through the news media and respondents' attitude to the nation's political affairs

<i>Knowledge</i>		<i>Respondents' attitude to South African politics</i>		<i>Total</i>
		<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>	
<i>Above Average</i>	Count	35	99	134
	% within knowledge	26.1	73.9	100.0
<i>Below Average</i>	Count	11	87	98
	% within knowledge	11.2	88.8	100.0
<i>Total</i>	Count	46	186	232
	% within knowledge	19.8	80.2	100

$\chi^2 = 9.900$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.005$

Table 8: Relationship between respondents' knowledge of South African politics through the news media and respondents' readiness to participate in South African Politics

<i>Knowledge</i>		<i>Respondents' attitude to South African politics</i>		<i>Total</i>
		<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>	
<i>Above Average</i>	Count	30	104	134
	% within knowledge	22.4	77.6	100.0
<i>Below Average</i>	Count	10	88	98
	% within knowledge	10.2	89.8	100.0
<i>Total</i>	Count	40	192	232
	% within knowledge	17.2	82.8	100.

$\chi^2 = 5.889$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.005$

DISCUSSION

Level of media access by the students of the North-West University, Mafikeng campus is high. As the finding shows, respondents' access to the old media at the above average level is eighty-four percent, while their access to the digital media at above average level is 89.6 percent. This indicates that the extent of access to news media by the students is impressive. However, the patterns of access to news media vary according to location. While the students are on the university campus, the media type they claimed to be most accessible to them is the digital media—*Facebook*, *Twitter*, and blogs that are Internet-based ($n=211$; 90.9%). But whenever they are outside the university campus, the most accessible news media is television ($n=137$; 59.1%), followed by radio ($n=53$; 22.8%), while their access to the print media and the digital media is extremely low (3.9% and 12.5%, respectively). This implies that the location where the students find themselves determines the type of news media accessible to them, and this may also have implications for their level of political awareness and participation.

Empirical findings (Al-Kandari and Hasan 2012; Chatora 2012; Bosch 2013) have shown that in several parts of the world, especially in Asian and Arab nations, youth have actively deployed the social media to initiate, mobilize and sustain political agitation and participation, while they have also used their cell phones to create, disseminate or consume diverse media contents ranging from politics to entertainment (Wei 2008). If youth have access to the digital media both within and outside the school environment, this would increase their knowledge of political affairs and other national issues, which they are not likely to have if they solely rely on the conventional media, especially those owned and controlled by the political elite, who decide what issues constitute the media content and perpetuate the phenomenon of 'elite continuity' that has characterized the South Africa's post-1994 transition to multicultural democracy (Tsarwe 2014: 289). As articulated in the tenets of Democratic-Participant Media Theory (for example, Folarin 1998; Severin and Tankard (Jnr) 2001; Watson 2003; Sambe 2005; McQuail 2007), the media system must be reorganized and democratized in such a manner that citizens, including the most disadvantaged groups especially those

at the grassroots (Ojebode 2009; Moemeka 2009; Myers 2011), would have better access to the news media, be empowered to contribute to media contents, and be free from the conventional whims of bureaucracy, monopolistic ownership (Kaul 2012) and excessive professional control. Free access to the digital media both within and outside the university setting would encourage and empower the youth to contribute to the democratic project of South Africa.

Furthermore, this study has established that majority of the respondents have high level of media literacy and good knowledge of the media system in the South African society. When asked to determine the veracity of two statements about media system, majority ($n=157$; 67.7%) of the respondents agreed that the proposition that the government-owned media, rather than the private media, are likely to give a more accurate, credible, fair and independent report on corrupt practices by government officials is false. At the same time, an overwhelming majority of the respondents ($n=201$; 86.6%) agreed to the view that propaganda (half-truth) is a common feature of political contents of mass media. As described by Siverblatt and Eliceiri (1997: 48), media literacy is 'a critical thinking skill that enables audiences to decipher the information that they receive through the channels of mass communications and empowers them to develop independent judgments about media content'. The implication of this finding, therefore, is that with this impressive level media literacy displayed by the students, they are believed to have the capability, not only to read, but also to decipher and interpret diverse media contents, take informed political decisions, and effectively engage in political discourse and diverse social activities.

Access to news media has a positive impact on the respondents' knowledge of South African politics. As evident from the findings, 176 (75.9%) of the respondents claimed that their level of access to the news media improved, to a large extent, their knowledge of South African politics. Besides, the respondents' knowledge of South African politics gained through the news media is significantly associated with their attitude to the nation's politics ($\chi^2 = 9.900$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.005$) and their readiness to participate in South African politics ($\chi^2 = 5.889$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.005$). On the one hand, respondents who claimed to have good (above average) knowl-

edge demonstrated more positive attitudes (26.1%) compared with those who confessed to have poor (below average) knowledge (11.2%). On the other hand, respondents with good (above average) knowledge demonstrated higher readiness (22.4%) to participate in South African politics compared with the level of readiness (10.2%) of those with poor (below average) knowledge. However, generally, respondents' attitude to South African politics, and their readiness to engage in South African democratic project are discouragingly negative (80.2%) and extremely low (17.2%) respectively, compared to the levels of their positive attitude (19.8%) and their unwillingness to take part in politics (82.8%).

As submitted by the interviewees, the major reasons for the students' negative attitude and unwillingness to participate in South African politics are, (1) pervasive corruption in governance, (2) sheer greed, and (3) poor leadership. One interviewee, Olebogeng, a Master's student in the Department of Economics explains the reasons for the pervasive negative attitude among the students as follows:

"First is the corruption that has been going on unabated in the government. Second is mismanagement, inefficient, and ineffective use of public funds. With these reasons, one is expected to lose interest in politics and have a negative attitude to the entire political system of South Africa."

Tshepiso, a 300-level Law student, sums up the problems thus:

"South African politics promotes corruption and an ugly picture that tells you that one does not need to acquire education to be successful in the South African society. What one needs is to become a politician. There is a lack of quality leadership and the politicians' sole ambition is to promote their own interests at the expense of the society which they lead."

The foregoing findings support outcomes of recent some studies by, for example, Shim et al. (2015), You et al. (2015), and Vakaota and Mishra-Vakaota (2015). Access to news media, especially the social media, empowers citizens to engage in political discussions and increase their knowledge about politics. News media have the power to educate citizens and increase their knowledge on core national issues such as politics. However, there is a limit to the extent this knowledge through the media can drive the cit-

izens to take action or lead to development of positive attitude especially if there are other contending critical issues such as corruption and bad leadership as identified by the interviewees. The foregoing finding partly agrees and disagrees with the submission of Deegan cited Bosch (2013: 120) that 'in the post-apartheid era, the black youth are generally politically apathetic and driven more by consumerism than a desire for activism or citizenship'. This study has established that current set of black youth has demonstrated to be politically apathetic, but simultaneously seems to be politically conscious and apparently critical of the failing political system instead of being ignorant and driven by mere 'consumerism'. The findings of this study, however, corroborate the submission of Van Rensburg (2012) in a study conducted to examine how South Africa, Kenya and Zambia employed the Internet to enhance their national democratic projects. In specific reference to South Africa, the researcher concludes that despite evidence of the possibility for South Africa to become a model for other African nations in the integration of Internet usage in the nation's democratic advancement, there was still palpable skepticism among the citizens as a result of sundry social vices and the ruling party's restless intent to limit press freedom. Similarly, as evident in this current study, despite evidence that youth are getting more knowledge of South African politics through access to the news media, their attitudes to politics have remained negative, and they may remain perpetually disinterested in the democratic project of South Africa as long as the problems of corruption, greed, and bad leadership persist in the country.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the mass media plays significant roles in the success of a nation's democracy. The extent to which the media system is vibrant and the degree of media literacy and access by the citizens have cumulative effects on the success or failure of a democracy. South Africa, like other African nations with challenges of media access and political participation has invested substantial resources in media literacy education in order to encourage and enhance the citizens' participation in the democratic project of the country. As established by this study, the investment could not be de-

scribed as a waste of resources because respondents claimed to have good access to news media and they demonstrated an impressive level of media literacy. Besides, the youth claimed to have gained good knowledge of South African politics through their exposure to the news media. However, the respondents demonstrated a high level of political apathy, which they attributed to bad leadership and corruption among the political leaders of South Africa.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As evident in the findings, the patterns of access to the media vary according to locations, while the students expressed high level of apathy to the nation's political affairs. These findings have serious implications for the success of democratic project of South Africa. One, unless concerted efforts are made by the government to ensure that the youth have access to the social media and digital media generally especially beyond the University setting, their knowledge of South African politics may wane as they leave the University environment where they have free access to the Internet that provides the platform for the diverse digital media. Two, mere access to the news media may not be enough to encourage political participation by the youth. Until the problems of corruption, greed and bad leadership-as identified in this study-are squarely addressed, the negative attitudes of the youth toward South African politics would continue to worsen. It is, therefore, recommended that the South African government show more commitment to media literacy campaign and give more attention to development of the media system, especially the digital media. Besides, the youth should be empowered to have more access to the news media so that their level of participation in the democratic project of the nation would increase. The conventional news media in South Africa should be free from state influence and give priority to the campaign against corruption and bad leadership, which the youth have identified as the major factors responsible for their apathy towards politics.

LIMITATIONS

As already acknowledged, the students' level of knowledge of, and attitude to South African

politics are respondent-rated. Besides, the data for this study was based on a survey of one University in South Africa. These factors may limit the extent to which findings of this study could be generalized. Nonetheless, findings of this study have significant implications for South African politics and political participation by the youth. The study could also serve as a guide for a study of wider scale that uses attitude and knowledge rating scales.

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