



Play as an Indicator of Public Opinion in Online Political Commentary: A Content Analysis of Online News Forums Leading Up to the 2014 South African General Elections

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ABSTRACT This paper seeks to look at play as an indicator of public opinion in online political commentary of online news forums leading to the 2014 South African general elections. A qualitative content analysis was used to analyse viewers' comments about 2014 South African general elections posted online. A corpus of all commentary appended to 2014 South African general election news reports published online by Media24, Times Media Group, Mail & Guardian, Independent Newspapers, Caxton CTP, and TNA Media were selected. NVIVO 11 was utilized to code these readers' comments into their respective categories. The core findings of this paper reflect that online readers do not just engage in play but are more interactive and participative on these online public forums and their political discourse echo political affiliations with different political parties, bearing in mind that South Africa has 13 political parties that participated and are represented in parliament.

INTRODUCTION

Online news forums are a ubiquitous feature of online journalism, where readers gather, discuss and even comment on news reports (Siapera and Veglis 2012: 112). A community of readers forms to participate as in a public forum where they post their comments in response to news reports and other readers' comments. These comments offer researchers an opportunity to sample the public opinion of at least those who have online access to these news sites. This technological privilege means their views do not represent an aggregate political sentiment of the wider population to which they belong, but do at least reflect those found among a mainly middle class population with the means to participate online through their cell phones, personal computers and other digital devices. Play theory argues that audiences select and use media primarily according to the subjective pleasures these afford. In short, newsreaders do not engage in rationalist acts of 'information acquisition', but principally play with the media (Glasser 2000: 24). The factors that define play include freedom, self-satisfaction, enjoyment and expression of all basic motives of human behaviour.

Stephenson (1967) argued that reading the newspaper is play, and that people read newspapers because they find it pleasurable in the

same way that a child's game is pleasurable. 'Where many critics of mass communication have gone wrong, Stephenson's emphasis is in studying [the media] as essentially an agent of persuasion rather than as an agent of entertainment and pleasure (Berger 1995: 20). Stephenson's (1967) play theory of mass communication offers a way of articulating both the reasoned and the culturalist aspects of citizenship, by seeing play as the way people typically read newspapers, watch television, listen to the radio and participate in news forms online. That is, users are neither thoroughly rational nor completely creative in their uses of the news media. They are neither utterly constrained nor completely free. Play occupies the space between these two positions. While Stephenson's 1967 text 'has not been widely and favourably received' (Glasser 1982: 102), its claim that media users principally play with media appears to offer an explanation for the range of online discourse found in news forums that purport to offer space for citizens' opinion.

Online public news forums therefore offer researchers an accessible indicator of public opinion expressed in a natural setting. They (online news forums) offer raw data on matters people voluntarily talk about. Thelwall (2007: 277) suggests that weblogs offer the "first general-

purpose source of retrospective public opinion in the social sciences.” Unlike standard surveys, extracting opinions from these forums provides a data set free of any preconception of the issues people talk about. Surveys and questionnaires require respondents to reflect upon and even modify their opinions, whereas recordings of these opinions expressed in a natural setting might come across as quite different. Surveys are good at capturing long-term changes of opinion, but online forums reveal the short-term shifts that often shape policy discussions. Forums are more informative than opinion barometers like approval ratings because they provide the immediate context in which opinions are expressed. In spite of these advantages, the research potential of using online forums for public opinion research is largely unexplored in the social sciences due to unsolved measurement and validity issues.

This paper reviews and compares different methods of drawing public opinion indicators from online communication, with a focus not only on what participants in online forums discuss about political issues, but also on how they discuss about it. Thus the concept of play is not only about emotion, but also concerns modification and resistance to preferred ways of reading. Stuart Hall’s (1980) Encoding/Decoding model becomes relevant here as it directly criticises rational assumptions about how people consume media messages. This last point makes relevant the concept of play itself. The paper aims to investigate and to develop a comprehensive conception of play as an analytical concept. Stephenson’s model is useful to this end, but it becomes necessary to resort of Huizinga’s concept of *Homo Ludens* (1950) (Stephenson’s source) as well as Herbert Marcuse’s (1955) more critical use of the concept of play to gauge the research potential of online communication as a measure of public opinion, and to compare it to standard methodologies. It goes without saying that a thorough study of research into online public political discourse is necessary in this paper. Sunstein’s (2001) use of the concepts of homophily and diversity in analysis of online discourse offer a useful correlate to reason and play.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are

- ♦ To establish if readers online constitute a discursive community that broadens play or public opinion on South African politics
- ♦ To establish if online public commentary reflect play or interactions among online members.

Citizenship and Public Opinion

Citizenship and public opinion are mutually constitutive entities constrained by the quality and characteristics of the communicative and political environment in which they are formed. However, the concept of public opinion is problematic. In the era described in Habermas’s public sphere, public opinion was a discursive practice. But since the Gallup polls of the mid 1930s, public opinion research was a ‘normal science’ based upon standardised questionnaires. Here the mutual constitution of citizenship and public opinion comes more clearly into focus. Unlike the earlier era marked by a proliferation of newspapers each with its specific market, in “the broadcast era, it was easy to imagine an identifiable ‘public’ as constructed by exposure to similar news sources and political messages and as measured in public opinion polls as statistical aggregates” (Goidel 2011: 20).

Public opinion research emerged during this period as a complement to the predominant features of broadcast media. “The social construction of the public as an aggregated total of individual opinions in such an environment served the very real and useful purpose of summarizing political attitudes” (Goidel 2011: 18). Public opinion research had reached paradigm status at this time, but its emulation of natural science meant that what researchers were trying to ascertain was itself is a *scientific* construct “created by the procedures that are established to ‘discover’ it,” and rested upon the assumption that people are “thoughtful and rational citizens of a democracy” (Osborne and Rose 1999: 382). The hegemony that Gallup and his fellow pollsters enjoyed into the 1950s remained impervious to occasional interjections hence (Herbst 2011: 90-91), Blumer (1948) and other communication scholars argued that public opinion, as it was

actually measured, was an instrumentalist aggregate that bore little resemblance to the actual beliefs of citizens.

The Modes of Public Participation in South African Democracy

As South African democracy evolves and potentially matures, South Africans have been using a range of democratic institutions and processes (both claimed by the citizens and government-initiated) to constitute their continuously evolving interface with government. This section first provides general conceptualisations of participation and participatory democracy, and then develops the concept in its South African application. Cvetkovich and Earle (1994: 163) observe that public participation can take many forms, including testifying at hearings, taking part in public opinion surveys and serving on advisory organs. In addition, direct action, including peaceful and violent protests, constitutes powerful forms of civil society participation in governance and engagement in the policy processes (across the analytically differentiated phases of the policy process).

The DPLG (2007b: 15) argues that public participation denotes an 'open, accountable process through which individuals and groups within selected communities can exchange views and influence decision making'. Cvetkovich and Earle (1994: 164) found out that, one of the fallacies regarding public participation is that the mere act of participation satisfies people and makes them believe that justice has been done. People in the act of participation are given 'voice'. They have the opportunity to express their opinions on matters that affect them. Cvetkovich and Earle (1994: 174) argued that the problem with this 'accommodative voice' is that power relationships are left unchanged. Instead, the key to public satisfaction is the giving of 'transformational voice', which enables people to also affect outcomes and to be satisfied with the knowledge that they had exerted that power.

These observations are notable for the report, given that they emphasise that participation is not merely acts of engagement for the sake of engagement, but is exercised for particular progressive and developmental objectives. For the purposes of the study at hand, the fol-

lowing six modes of popular participation are distinguished: The first one is that members of civil society could desire active engagement in the phases of agenda setting or in policy formulation. The analysis conceptualises this as '*pro-active (conventional) participation*'. It may be manifested upon request and initiative by government, or be of a more spontaneous nature. It may emanate from community and/or NGO initiatives. Secondly, citizens might be satisfied with having their interests represented by their elected members of government, across the respective spheres. '*Representation*', or *representational participation*, is the term used in this regard and it relates to the notion of indirect or representative democracy.

Thirdly, the political and bureaucratic executives drive processes for the integration and coordination of policy and governance. These include a wide range of *centre-driven initiatives*, also in the domain of giving effect to policy initiatives. This became the centre of the top-down range of participatory initiatives that were solicited from mainly elite civil society stakeholders. However, several of the initiatives in the next bullet point were also linked to these 'centre initiatives'. Fourthly, 'community-engagement participation' is identified as participation that relates to a range of important phases of the policy process and governance, and has a bearing on engagement with members of both the political and the bureaucratic spheres of government. It is also 'extended' participation, because these initiatives often involve participation that helps bolster the conventional channels of representation. It brings executives, legislators, bureaucrats and citizens together to help address developmental issues that might have become neglected in the processes of more conventional representation and participation.

Fifthly, civil society members could regard the formal processes as ineffectual, and feel that pressure, protest and mobilization are the required forms of policy participation. This is referred to as '*alternative (or unconventional) participation*'. It constitutes an extension of the modes of public participation, and, at this stage in South Africa's unfolding democracy, is also aimed at the deepening of democracy. Lastly, participation may also evolve in more passive, '*information-related modes of engagement with*

government'. Most citizens, in some form or another, receive government and policy-related information. This would be either directly from government media, or from the mass electronic and print media on government. Citizens may use this information to try to become more active participants in public affairs. The initiative for the first and third options comes mainly from government; the initiative for the fifth type of participation is overwhelmingly bottom-up, while that of the second category is initiative from below but with dependence on facilitation from government in order for it to manifest itself. However, the majority will remain relatively passive recipients of information that will, in due course, impact on the other modes of participation either to change or to sustain prevailing modes. This paper builds on the homophily and diversity perspective and the play theory.

Homophily and Diversity

The homophily perspective holds that people go online in search of people with the similar concern. By contrast, the diversity standpoint holds that people from different backgrounds meet online to part information and sentiments and to debate with one another (Sunstein 2001). Both perspectives point to problematic aspects in online participation or deliberation. Homophily points to a tendency in participants to reveal their views only where like-minded views are expressed, and to become more radical than they would do in an 'offline' context. The diversity perspective notes the tendency of online political talk to become unruly, irrational, and far from the ideals of public deliberation. Stromer-Galley (2003) criticizes Sunstein's views for being based on anecdotal observations "without having studied a particular discussion group over a period of time to measure whether such extreme movement occurs." She adds that "[b]oth perspectives are in need of further empirical research."

The authors used homophily and diversity as one of the analytical tools because of their assumption. The assumption of homophily that people go online in search of people with the similar concern is in line with what this paper seeks to prove. That is people amalgamate online to share political commentary on online news forums leading up to the 2014 South African

general elections. The diversity perspective is also useful in this paper in that, it notes the tendency of online political talk to become unruly, irrational, and far from the ideals of public deliberation an idea that the paper seeks to prove.

Play Theory

Play theory argues that audiences select and use media primarily according to the subjective pleasures they afford. In short, newsreaders do not engage in rationalist acts of 'information acquisition', but principally play with the media (Glasser 2000: 24). The factors that define play include freedom, self-satisfaction, enjoyment and expression which are all basic motives of human behavior. Stephenson argued that reading the newspaper is play and that people read newspapers because they find it pleasurable in the same way that a child's game is found to be pleasurable. "Where many critics of mass communication have gone wrong, Stephenson's emphasis is in studying [the media] as essentially an agent of persuasion rather than as an agent of entertainment and pleasure" (Berger 1995: 20).

Play theory is most notably associated with the work of Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga (1950), but it was psychologist William Stephenson (1967) who first applied Huizinga's thinking to mass communication. That mass communication scholars have not taken play theory seriously (Glasser 1982: 102) may have a lot to do with its association with games, children and other 'things' not considered sufficiently rational and adult-like. Certainly, for Stephenson the fundamental outcome to be derived from much of mass communication is merely plain, old-fashioned fun. Thus, in his writing he stated that, "Our theory . . . in as far as mass communication involves entertainment is typically a matter of communication pleasure without any substantial achievement and obliges no work purposes, but it does induce certain rudiments of relaxation" (Stephenson 1967: 59). Glasser, however, finds this theory to be "a fresh and compelling alternative to and in many ways a convincing refutation of conventional explanations of media consumption" (Glasser 2000: 23). Berger describes Stephenson's book as "one that offers some offbeat and interesting ideas" (Berger 1995: 19).

The authors chose play theory as the analytical tool because it explains why online participants are not always involved in serious debates but finds time now and again to play with each other. The paper follows the supposition that play offers relaxation away from real life for it is deliberate, impulsive and it transpires within identified parameters and transpires timeously. Thus play commences and concludes on its own and yields nothing more than play itself.

Play in Online Deliberation

Coleman and Blumler (2009: 4–5) in Caldwell (2013) noted that, a citizen is normally taken to be an individual, resident of a state, with absolute rights, informed by the mass media, with contribution to public discussions on matters of public interest, voicing his/ her interests in the public domain, trying ‘to influence public policies and decisions, ranging from choosing and voting for a certain individual or political party putting up posters, being part of advocacy assemblages or be part of the law breaking citizens. However, it was Oakeshott (2004: 65) borrowing from the writings of the political philosopher Michael Oakeshott’s (2004: 496) who with great emphasis postulated that, citizens are ‘members of a community and of a country as a whole’. Certainly, citizenship embraces participation in public dialogue in as much as dialogue constitutes democracy (Kim et al. 1999: 362). Dialogue is evasively a distinctive phenomenon of citizenship than is membership of a state, not restricted to activities such as voting, and tax remittance. In their writings on deliberative democracy, Fishkin and Laslett (2003: 4) postulated that ‘there are many possible institutional settings for deliberation’. A notion which Sunstein (2003: 80–81) agrees to when he noted that “...each society has its own internet discursive collectives who engage in discussions on day to day issues” .

This paper, is dealing with interaction in an online news forum. The data set comprised reports published on Media24, Times Media Group, Mail & Guardian, Independent Newspapers, Caxton CTP, and TNA Media during the period leading up to and including the 2014 general election. Primarily it was supposed that the comments would be coded and analysed in or-

der to indicate public sentiment about online discourse, if not actual ‘public opinion’, given the representativeness of participants with online access. Using insights drawn from conversation analysis, the interaction between participants on the forum would be studied as an expression of citizens’ deliberation, if not deliberative democracy. In line with the above oversight the data gathered reflected that participants would either respond to each other or respond directly to the story. This to some extent portrays that the internet is reach in public opinion though it does not debunk the fact that play is involved.

Linking Play Theory to the Study

In the quest to determine whether online participants engage in play or serious discourse, this paper utilized NodeXL as a tool for extracting and analysing online readers’ comments and NVIVO 11 for analysis. This is in line with Huizinga’s thought that, play is clearly seen in language patently as allegory that is basically a play on words, a depiction, ingenious restoration of authenticity in metaphorical or expressive terms. Huizinga’s analysis of the words used in various languages simple, orthodox, and contemporary to express the idea of play convinced him that the play concept appeared earlier and is more fundamental than its opposite (seriousness).

Thus in relation to this paper, online discourse though essentially a contributing factor towards public opinion cannot be divorced from play. In essence, online participants derive pleasure from reading news and engaging in dialogue in online political discussion. Hence In his book *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga portrays contemporary civilization as one in which material interests, cynicism, and the negation of every norm not only exist (as they always have), but are eminent principles which replace the rules that inspire all play, all noble activity, and all honourable competition. To him the dissipation of play is apparent in the dissection of the discrepancy amongst play and seriousness, thus the day to day life of politics, war, economics, and morality deteriorate into pseudo-play, and play loses its essential abilities of extemporaneity, impartiality, innocence, and enjoyment.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology is qualitative content analysis, which requires drawing on discourse theory; frame theory and possibly network analysis. Content analysis is historically defined as “a multipurpose research method developed specifically for investigating any problem in which the content of communication serves as the basis of inference” (Holsti 1969:2). Krippendorff (1980, 2004) defines content analysis as a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context. As for Weber (1990) it is a research methodology that utilizes a set of procedures to make valid inferences from text. This is what this paper also sought to do as the use of content analysis helped the authors to be able to make replicable and valid inferences from the data collected.

NVIVO was used to code and categorize a corpus of readers’ comments into different themes and their sub-themes. The nodes in the center of the diagram indicate the main themes of the discussion and other surrounding nodes indicate the sub-themes connected. The main theme is interpreted as the parent and represents the central theme of discussion. The sub-theme which originates from the center is interpreted as the child. The main theme may be taken as the headline of discussion and the sub-theme as the sub-heading. This is as illustrated here (**parent= main theme, child= sub-theme**).

Population

Specifically for this paper, the population consists of the online participants who are assumed to be conversing on the headlines leading up to the 2014 South African general elections; though, there is a possibility that others participate for different reasons. According to Du Plooy (2001: 100), the phrase “population” does not solitarily refer to people, but can also be used in the definition of any group or collective of individuals, groups, organizations, social artifacts, or social relations” *inter alia*. For the purpose of data collection, the rationale was to gather a corpus of all commentary appended to all 2014 election news reports published online by Media24, Times Media Group, Mail

& Guardian, Independent Newspapers, Caxton CTP, and TNA Media.

RESULTS

The paper established that, online participants engage in play activities from time to time as some were seen to be posting comments for the sake of passing time. It was also evident that, one cannot totally separate play from seriousness as it is part of online discourse. The authors attributed the inseparable nature of play and seriousness to the fact that, online participants are natural human beings who also need time to reflect on their socio- economic and political life and have fun at the same time (play). The authors finally established that, play is partially an indicator of public opinion. Thus the results from the views of the participants revealed a mixture of seriousness with play in shaping their public opinion in online news forums.

Analysis of Participants’ Comments on Politics

In this section the concept ‘politics’ is the main theme referred to as the parent surrounded by different sub-themes referred to as children. It is noteworthy that, the main theme in NVIVO terminology is interpreted as the parent and represents the central theme of discussion and the sub-theme which originates from the centre is interpreted as the child (**parent=main theme, child= sub-theme**).

The authors noted that, in their arguments participants distinguished that, all human being are political beings by nature. They also argued that, politics is the practice and theory of influencing and being influenced by other people. They further maintained that more narrowly, politics refers to achieving and exercising positions of governance and organized control over a human community, particularly a state. Having this in mind it becomes difficult to divorce any human being from discussing politics let alone during the time of national elections. Some participants were of the view that the different political party choices, different viewpoints and the adrenaline of participating in an election are what make politics interesting. One of the participants contributed by saying:

“What do you base this on? They are certainly not saying that, given their phrases like: ‘Equity with excellence’. Don’t believe everything EFF and cope tell you”.

It must be noted that the parent politics encompasses many other children as depicted in Figure 1. During the 2014 general election online discussions, the concept politics was raised by 2 participants.

Politics and Political Discussion

Participants’ Comments on Political Disagreement, Political Tolerance and Political Agreement

Participants reiterated that, South Africa has a vibrant multiparty political system, with 13 parties with all of them contesting elections. They further pointed out that, during the 2014 general election all of them entered the election race with the intention to be chosen to lead the country. However some were happy that all of them are represented in the National Assembly. In their arguments they pointed ideological dis-

agreement as one of the reasons that cause people to choose different political parties. They further argued that, as citizens we subscribe to different political ideologies hence we have political disagreements. During the 2014 general elections online participants shared different political ideas and at one point they were found to be in disagreement. Others were of the view that their own political party is the best while others thought theirs is the best. Participants discussed issues such as the lifespan of EFF with some suggesting that it will not see life beyond elections while others view it as the solution to the failure of ANC. Some of the participants were of the view that the reason they deserted the ANC for other political parties is because the ANC failed them so they are seeking solace somewhere else. The concept ‘political disagreement’ was raised by 24 online participants. One of the participants argued that:

“Not really, the ANC is well aware that this country has a large surplus of stupid people, it will have the votes it needs for the foreseeable future, and when it does lose it will be to a much worse party like the EFF, which will sim-

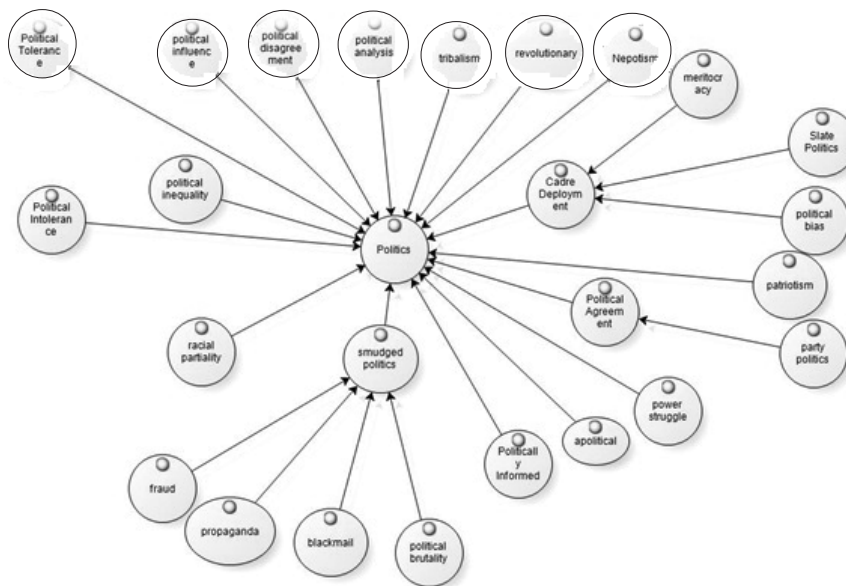


Fig. 1. Politics
Source: Authors

ply increase the dive into third world dust bowl status”.

Participants also pointed out that, with 13 political parties contesting an election with the hope of ruling the country one has to exercise political tolerance. Some were of the opinion that there is bound to be many different views points resulting in tension either amongst those directly contesting the election or the voters. They further argued that, when contesting an election, one has to bear in mind that life does not end with an election but all the 13 parties will each have a seat in parliament. Hence there is need for them to tolerate each other for the sake of moving the nation ahead and serving their different supporters fairly. They were quick to also point out that any election is associated with floor crossing and there is need for political tolerance amongst the general populace as well as those in position of power. These participants concluded by suggesting that they need to tolerate each other for they understand that they do not belong to one political party and neither do they share the same political ideology. The concept ‘political tolerance’ was raised by 24 online participants. Thus one of the participants had the following comment to make:

“Keep the governors divided and the people united....20% ANC, 20% DA, 20% IFP and 40% to all the other dozens of parties, that’s what i would want relatively. Or 30% each for the above and 10% in the swing vote of multiple parties”.

Participants went on to say, even though we are entitled to different views and political ideologies at one point we tend to agree either politically or otherwise just like any other person. They further added that who are involved in politics or political debate have to find one another at some point. During the 2014 national elections those who participated in online debate seemed to be in agreement in one way or the other. The concept ‘political agreement’ was raised by 15 online participants. One of them went on to say:

“Let us, in one voice, congratulate the new comrade Premiers, and ask that they have divine guidance and execute their duties for the benefit of their provinces and South Africa”.

Analysis of Participants’ Comments on Cadre Deployment and Party Politics

The authors noted that, any political party has its own infighting and during the run to the 2014 general elections online blogs carried different headlines on party politics with online participants finding points of discussion. In their response to these headlines participants pointed out that, each and every party has its own political differences that they need to deal with. They further argued that in the 2014 general elections, ANC had to deal with party politics that affected them and the tripartite alliance. Participants were of the view that, the ANC party politics must remain politics of the ANC and no other party must intervene. Those participants who commented in this concept are regarded as adding to argumentation. Thus their arguments were advancing a particular view point to the group. One of the participants went on to say:

“They are ANC premiers in case you haven’t noticed”.

The concept ‘party politics’ was discussed by 2 participants.

Participants acknowledged that, the concept of party politics is linked to the issue of cadre deployment. This to them is an issue that affect almost all political parties across the world. They singled out South Africa where deployment of ANC cadres in strategic positions played an important role in the ANC’s taking control of the post-liberation state. They also pointed out that after South Africa’s post 1994 constitutional democracy, the ANC dominated tripartite alliance consistently utilised the practice of cadre deployment in public administration. Some even argued that presently the ANC, the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) co-operate closely. Others were of the supposition that many senior civil servants are overtly members of the ANC and help keep its structures in place by running branches and canvassing support for ANC policies in their spare time. In their view, cadre deployment can work, provided competent cadres are chosen with due regard for the conflict of interest this might cre-

ate. Those participants who seemed inclined to the ANC pointed out that popular trust and loyalty are key phenomena that give the ANC and government the sustainability of cadre deployment processes.

They went on to argue that, the ANC felt in many cases justifiably that intervention through cadre deployment would be acting against any possible sabotage by the opposition parties. To them, the best way to neutralise this threat was to install loyal party members who could at least be trusted politically. They however said it was unfortunate that some members compromised the legitimacy of the cadre deployment policy as envisaged by the ANC. Interestingly some noted that the ANC is unapologetic about the implementation of this policy amidst criticisms from the opposition parties and some of the organisation's disgruntled members. During the 2014 national elections online participants had to discuss the concept cadre deployment mainly looking at the ANC and the concept cadre deployment was discussed by 26 participants. Below is a one of the comments posted:

"Strategist at ANC Luthuli house are dumb, how can you deploy Ntombi instead of Barbara Creecy whose performance has been consistent throughout, especially in Gauteng where the ANC won by 53%. Barbara Creecy was the perfect candidate for premiership of Gauteng to lift public confidence. ANC say bye to City of Johannesburg".

Analysis of Participants' Comments on Slate Politics

In this analysis, the authors noted that, some participants proved to be knowledgeable than others. They provided definitions for those who happened to be confused. One participant went on to provide a definition of slate politics. The participant stated that, the general definition of a "slate" is simply a list of candidates to be considered for nomination by a political party for elections, appointments, or the like. From an ANC perspective according to a participant, a slate can be defined as a list of candidates to be nominated by particular factions for appointment into the top leadership positions of the party. In the views of the participants the issue of slate politics in the ruling party is becoming a major prob-

lem. Their suggestion was that perhaps the time has come for the party to consider a policy that limits the reach of this mechanism somehow. This to them is a matter for ANC members to contend with. They further argued that slate politics within the "top six" of the ruling party for the ordinary citizen, should not be as much of a problem. To them the problem is its effects once a government administration is put in place after the general elections.

Participants went on to say, slates in the ANC are driven by strong underlying political dynamics of the day and they are hotly contested. They can stretch from the initial top six positions down to the top 86 positions that span the entire national executive committee (NEC) of the party. Participants noted that the NEC top positions comprise the men and women in whose hands (and whatsoever whims) the future of this country lies for the next five years and further. But from the perspective of ordinary as noted by online participants, people should worry more about how internal ANC slate politics manifest in the formation and running of the government. In other participants' views, slates are wild and pervasive in the government structures and the proper term for it is cronyism. These slates exist in ubiquitous form, and the mess with them, in contrast to within the party, is that they are not positively declared.

Participants concluded by noting that if any ANC leader should pass through the "eye of a needle" it should certainly be so in government too. To them South Africans must find ways to limit political slates in government as a matter of unwavering policy. As stated by bloggers, due to practical nuances, each citizen may have a different take on the level at which slate politics should be imposed. In their conversation participants argued that slate politics tend to marginalise individuals who are otherwise the best and have people's needs at heart. Hence, others argued, policy debate must be preferred over political slates if people are serious about good governance. One of the participants had this to say:

"Make a note of these names. If, according to Zuma, they perform "well", they are destined for great(er) things in the ANC."

The concept 'slate politics' was discussed by 15 participants.

DISCUSSION

The paper discovered the issues of play, public opinion political, social and economic issues discussed by readers online. In an attempt to answer the research questions, the authors came to the conclusion that the media arouses the readers' need for discussion on many issues which may include issues of play, public opinion political social and economic. The authors also found that media acts as an informer while readers analyse the information and generate a deliberate discursive online community. The media also has a way of influencing the readers' analysis of news stories that they carry on a daily basis. This means that all the issues brought out by online readers are determined by what is published by the different media houses. This Therefore means that, the presentation of political socio and economic stories by South African online media influences the readers' interpretation of different news stories. On one the hand, some of the readers prove themselves informed individuals, who are pertinent enough to inform and educate others while others just participate because they have access to online news and others just want to pass time thereby bringing out the concept of play.

A content analysis of readers' comments which was facilitated by NVIVO 11 revealed the main political socio and economic as well as play themes discussed online. Readers were able to show their different political affiliations, either with ANC DA, EFF, COPE, IFP, AZAPO, FFplus, NFP, ACDP and other parties. These different political formations or parties influenced the readers' attitudes; behavioral response and interpretation of online political news leading to the 2014 South African national elections. Online readers were either found to be pro-ANC, anti-ANC, pro-DA anti-DA, pro- EFF, anti- EFF, pro- COPE, and anti-COPE or to be non-partisan. The online discourse also brought out the concepts of corruption, economic meltdown, political struggles, western influence, dictatorship, HIV and AIDS, God, Parliament, diaspora and the concept of leadership change, amongst others. The authors explained these factors as reflecting the play theory, public opinion political and socio- economic problems found in South Africa. Any play, political and socio economic aspect left out might be due to the fact

that the authors only collected data within a purposive time frame that is four weeks before the election and ends two weeks after the event.

Online readers were found to be interacting unevenly and readers who interact more than others or who had many posts are defined as central actors. To the authors, their comments reflect independent personalities and shows that there is freedom of and after expression in South Africa. Some of the readers' comments reflect an autocratic state dominated by Zuma and his ruling party the ANC while some reflect a democratic state where everyone is free to air their views and vote for any political party freely. This reflects that we have different types of states, and in one state there can be characteristics of two or more kinds of style that is the democratic one and the autocratic one. Online readers reflect a responsive character marked with different behaviours with some being reactive as evidenced by the exchange of insults or direct confrontations where one will comment with an attacking tone's personality. However, it must be noted that, some online commenters show a matured political perspective influenced by their affiliation with their respective political organisations and respect for other citizens.

The findings of this paper agrees with Habermas (2006) that, the public sphere precisely has the function of 'cleansing' or 'laundering' flows of political communication. From the processing and compartmentalizing of the wild and diverse communication (entertainment, shows, news reports, and commentaries, etcetera) in the public sphere, politics struggle to select relevant information (problems, arguments, solutions). As a platform for the public sphere, the media sector possesses certain rules, which the players must play according to, in order to be taken seriously and to be efficient. Through deliberation, the public sphere is able to raise issues, provide arguments, specify interpretations and propose solutions. In the public sphere, demands from social movements and interest groups in the civil society become translated into political issues and arguments and articulate manifest, reflexive public opinions

CONCLUSION

The paper established that, online commenters portray ANC as a corrupt organization led

by the most corrupt leaders hence the need to replace it with the EFF for the DA is not an option because of its bias towards the white elite. However they praise it for bringing democracy which has seen black liberation, black empowerment policies and end to racial exclusion, its focus and tolerance of poverty and unemployment remains resented. Readers reflect that the ruling party is so corrupt that they go to any extent to win an election ranging from vote buying, vote rigging to deploying their own comrades in strategic positions within the IEC. Thus, online participants their sentence of a despotic ANC led government that kills, runs disputed elections in order to keep themselves in control. During the conduct of this paper, the authors came to the understanding that, the online discursive community can discuss more political and socio-economic issues depending on news story published for they proved to be flexible and knowledgeable about the factors that affect their daily lives. Some of the themes that the authors came up with and discussed above provide political and socio-economic issues that the online readers talk about. The paper further established that, online participants engage in play activities from time to time as some were seen to be posting comments for the sake of passing time. It was also evident that, one cannot totally separate play from seriousness as it is part of online discourse. The authors attributed the inseparable nature of play and seriousness to the fact that, online participants are natural human beings who also need time to reflect on their socio-economic and political life and have fun at the same time (play). The authors finally established that, play is partially an indicator of public opinion. Thus the results from the views of the participants revealed a mixture of seriousness with play in shaping their public opinion in online news forums.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The authors recommends that, there must be research to study the comments of readers at least after the first year period of general elections and hear if this was what they were expecting to get from the ruling party they would have elected to lead the South African political terrain though it seems uneasy since the commentary

platform might not reflect the true south African population for the major voters have no daily access to these online news forums. The researcher also suggests a dialogical analysis for future research so as to analyse how readers interact and influence each other looking at how their dialogue flows. Finally there is need to conduct research so as to find out why online readers participate in public deliberation in online forums and how do they set the agenda for themselves as related to that set by the media. The researcher's suggestions for future research are on the backdrop of outstanding but critical questions. Thus, what remains outstanding is what then differentiates play from any other gratuitous activity, such as compulsive behaviour or apparently motiveless crimes? And if play is distinguishable from seriousness only by its futility, how can it be said to have a civilizing influence?

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