

Twitter as a New Fourth Estate: A Case of Black Twitter, Trolling vs. Accountability

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Abstract: Globally, the emergence of social media particularly Twitter as a platform for social discourse has been well documented. Arguably, Twitter is an extension of mass media as the modern fourth estate. The fourth estate refers to the watchdog role of the mass media. Generally, mass media are used to ensure that government officials are held accountable by the public as the ideal fourth arm of the state. Thus, Twitter has afforded the public direct access to government officials. Twitter as a micro-blogging site is often used to challenge the government's lack of service delivery among other purposes. Accordingly, this investigation explores Twitter as a new fourth estate in South Africa. This qualitative inquiry used the online observation method to collect data from the relevant tweets, retweets, and comments as generated by the tweeps. Reflexive thematic analysis was employed to analyse data. Furthermore, Nick Couldry's practice theory is the apt theoretical lens in this paper. This theory accentuates the manner in which the public uses new media rather than how the latter takes advantage of the former. The findings of the study suggest that Twitter is in a better position to topple mass media as a modern fourth estate in South Africa. According to the online observations undertaken in this research, the government officials are worried about their projected image on Twitter. Therefore, the study recommends that the public should capitalise on Twitter to ensure that government officials are held accountable. Similarly, government officials should effectively use this platform to answer the public's probing questions about the activities of the state. The government officials should see the messages communicated through Twitter as part of transparency and accountability. The tweets as generated by the public directed to the government officials are not always meant to troll the officials, some of them are intended to stimulate accountability on the side of the government. Moreover, the mass media outlets should embrace Twitter as an alternative fourth estate.

Keywords: Black Twitter, Fourth estate, Government officials, Public, Twitter

1. Introduction

Mass media have been used as the fourth estate for decades (Fourie, 2018). Generally, governments and corporate entities depend on the media to reach out to the large audience (Su & Borah, 2019). Similarly, the public needs mass media to share their thoughts about prominent issues (Jonathan & Sagarzazu, 2020). Therefore, these factors magnify the role of media as the fourth estate. In other words, media are expected to play a watchdog role (Fourie, 2018). Arguably, media has a role to expose social injustices particularly in the public sector (Su & Borah, 2019). However, some media houses are known as gatekeepers as they marginalise some voices in the public. The emergence of social media has created a plethora of platforms for social engagements (Harder, Sevenans & Van Aelst, 2017). Social media also strengthens democracy wherein people in positions of authority are accountable to the people they serve and provide justification for their behaviour and deeds (Felle, 2016). This means

that social media as the modern fourth estate offers opportunities to collect and share news, communicate with audiences and advocate for change from the vibrant segment of the society which is young people (Harder, Paulussen & Van Aelst, 2016). One can argue that the advancement of social media is one of the components of the current phenomena of the fourth industrial revolution. However, social media could be used as a vehicle to spearhead accountability in government institutions. The modern fourth estate refers to the usage of the press for the purposes of disseminating information about political, social, and economic issues (Felle, 2016; Hansen, 2018). In other words, people have freedom to raise their views about different issues on social media.

Previously, the views of some members of the public were marginalised in the mainstream media. As such, mainstream media have been used as propaganda machines. The same propaganda machines were used to frame a certain agenda for a specific

purpose (Fourie, 2018). The framing strategy is used by media owners and authorities to shape and control public discourse (Newman, Dutton & Blank, 2012). This also means that social media users have to set their agenda with limited censorship. Despite a number of policies that regulate the conduct of social media users, censorship is not common on these platforms. Twitter is the selected microblogging site in this paper. This platform enables people to share their views about several issues including governance, health, entertainment etc. (Newman, Dutton & Blank, 2012). As such, prominent issues that are discussed on this platform are likely to trend, which cultivates open debate (Effing, Hillegersberg & Huibers, 2011). The importance of Twitter as a fourth estate is that no one controls the agenda in the social media platforms (Whipple & Shermak, 2020). Unlike mass media where the owners and editors set the agenda in place, social media users identify topical issues. Twitter is a virtual community wherein the participants who share common interests can share insights and actively embark on social discourses (Uwalaka & Watkins, 2018). In addition, these kinds of engagements are not strictly regulated particularly in South Africa.

In these kinds of engagements, the users can raise concerns about public figures and the government about lack of service delivery among other issues. The advantage of using Twitter as the modern fourth estate is that the public and government officials can communicate on this platform without any interference from media editors and other gatekeepers (Uwalaka & Watkins, 2018). Also, these engagements have the potential to influence the agenda in the mainstream media. As such this aspect helps to mitigate the strict regulations in the mainstream media. This would suggest that issues that are discussed on Twitter can influence the editorial process in the mainstream media (Su & Borah, 2019). On the other hand, the agenda set by mainstream media can be proliferated or challenged on Twitter (Uwalaka & Watkins, 2018).

2. Literature Review

Social media provide a participative digital platform, which connects a myriad people at the same time (Hansen, 2018). Moreover, one of the roles of social media as the modern fourth estate is to ensure that the society can engage in direct dialogue with politicians, government officials, and the entire government agencies, and it also gives the government

a chance to engage back (Davis, 2019). Social media have profoundly gained prominence particularly in the 21st century wherein the emergence of online applications such as Twitter, Facebook, Zoom, Google meet, Skype, and Telegrams are widely used by a plethora of people (Barn, Barn, Raimond & Mukherjee, 2017). More than ever before, the development of social media has given rise to a more interactive approach from the government and the people. It has become an effective entity in divulging relevant information for the public benefit, which could subsequently be used to enforce accountability and transparency from those who are in positions of government leadership (Eldridge, 2017; Newman, 2017). It is, therefore, undeniable to indicate that social media have the power to influence and shape the public debate which could gain the attention of the public.

Therefore, social media are effective as a modern fourth estate because many people, young and middle-aged people are connected to the internet who use it to get the attention of government officials (Ibrahim & Safieddine, 2020). Social media are independent media, which provide the public with the space to demand accountability from the government (Effing, Hillegersberg & Huibers, 2011). Hence, Su and Borah (2019) indicate that social media ensure government accountability by providing a platform for the public to interact with the government in a public platform. Similarly, Boczkowski, and Mitchelstein, (2017), postulate the same stance that social media provides open governance where people can interact with government officials and demand answers. However, Han, Lee and McCombs, (2017), summarise the roles of social media in relation to the modern fourth estate in three-fold that the roles are to share, learn and interact.

Wahl-Jorgensen, Hintz and Dencik (2017) postulate that the modern fourth estate seeks to uncover malicious acts such as corruption, bribery, maladministration, human rights violation from those who are abusing the public trust and resources. Meanwhile, in a study conducted by Nwokora, Isakhan and Pan (2020), the significance of the modern fourth estate in the United States of America (USA) is used by the press which plays an imperative role in the three branches of government which is the legislative, judicial and the executive. It is apparent that the modern fourth estate cuts across all the arms of government in South Africa similar to that of the USA (Whipple & Shermak, 2020).

2.1 The Effects of Social Media as the Modern Fourth Estate

Mass media have an important role as the watchdog for society (Fourie, 2018). Thus, mass media have both positive and negative effects on society. In the context of social media, there are both positive and negative effects of the platforms on society. As such, the negative effects of social media concern with the proliferation of harmful and inflammatory content (Akram & Kumer, 2017). Facebook is under pressure to manage and mitigate harmful content in its platform (Modiba, 2020). In addition, a plethora of content shared on various social media platforms contain insensitive information i.e. hate speech, disinformation and misinformation (Wahl-Jorgensen, Hintz & Dencik, 2017; Davis, 2019). Furthermore, hate speech, disinformation, and misinformation have the potential to adversely affect the reputation and the image of organisations. In most cases, the inflammatory remarks on social media are bereft of facts (Siddiqui & Singh, 2016). In the context of this paper, these effects have the potential to amplify or nullify the significance of Twitter as a new fourth estate. There is a need to explore a conundrum of this nature since the public deserves an alternative platform to overtly address critical issues without censorship and strict regulations. Twitter is a convenient platform for public engagements and social interactions. Nonetheless, this platform is affected by undesirable acts of trolling and cyberbullying which is the crux of this paper.

The culprits that share disinformation and misinformation would use parody accounts on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. There are myriad parody accounts on Twitter (Nwokora, Isakhan & Pan, 2020). Thus, some individuals who use parody accounts refrain from any form of accountability. Parody accounts are sometimes used to attack the personalities of popular figures such as politicians, public office bearers, celebrities etc. (Whipple & Shermak, 2020). Social media have the capacity to enhance how people interact on virtual platforms (Boczkowski, & Mitchelstein, 2017). This is imperative for social discourse. Additionally, social media users depend on these platforms to connect with the virtual world. Some use Twitter, Facebook and Instagram to access information about education, entertainment, current affairs etc. (Felle, 2016). People with common interests converge through social media to share information and content about such interests. In the context of this paper,

black Twitter is an online community for young South Africans who share common interests and values (Mpofu, 2019). The members of the public take advantage of these platforms to communicate with public office bearers (Barn, Barn, Raimond & Mukherjee, 2017). Nevertheless, mostly the social media engagements between the public and government officials are about grievances. When the public is not satisfied with service delivery they resort to social media as a channel of communication. In the context of this paper, the focus is on Twitter as a new fourth estate, a case of black Twitter particularly trolling versus accountability.

2.2 Trolling on Black Twitter

Trolling is a disadvantage as far as the use of Twitter as the modern fourth estate is concerned (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Modiba, 2020). In other words, trolling is tantamount to cyberbullying, which is prevalent on social media. Trolls are individuals who deliberately deviate from discussing important issues on social media to ridicule and post inflammatory comments about other people (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). In addition, these individuals would perpetuate hate speech and other forms of bigotry (Van Vuuren, Van Vuuren & Venter, 2012; Whipple & Shermak, 2020). The propensity of trolling has adverse effects on the critical discussion about accountability among government officials. Some trolls resort to using parody accounts to attack personalities particularly the public office bearers (Sampedro, Lopez-Ferrandez & Carretero, 2018; Ibrahim & Safieddine, 2020). More often than not, trolls would degenerate engagements about important issues to a mudslinging activity. In fact, some of the office bearers would resort to blocking trolls and other individuals who degenerate the discussions on Twitter (Davis, 2019). In some instances, trolls would generate and share fake news on the platform.

2.3 Accountability on Black Twitter

The advantage of Twitter as the modern fourth estate is that the public and government officials can communicate on this platform without any interference from media editors and other gatekeepers (Patel, 2019). Also, these engagements have the potential to influence the agenda in the mainstream media. As such this aspect helps to mitigate the strict regulations in the mainstream media (Djerf-Pierre & Shehata, 2017; Fourie, 2018).

This would suggest that issues that are discussed on Twitter can influence the editorial process in the mainstream media. On the other hand, the agenda set by mainstream media can be proliferated or challenged on Twitter (Hansen, 2018). During the recent uprising in KwaZulu-Natal and some parts of Gauteng, some mainstream media decided to turn a blind eye to violence that engulfed Phoenix where over 36 people were brutally killed. The public used Twitter and other social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to raise their concerns about vigilantism that claimed many lives in Phoenix. The users of this platform were not just tweeting about the events in Phoenix, some noticed that mainstream media is deliberately ignoring the event. This was a tragic event in the history of democratic South Africa after the Marikana massacre.

3. Design and Methodology

The exploratory research design is the overall plan for this paper. This design is apt in the context of this study as it explores Twitter as a new fourth estate particularly trolling versus accountability. Exploratory research design concerns scientific investigations that seek to explore a phenomenon (Malatji, Mphaga & Baloyi, 2020). This blueprint foregrounds the critical aspects of an inquiry (Bitsch, 2005). In addition, exploratory research design enables the researcher to answer the pertinent question concerning an investigation. Furthermore, this study is aligned with the qualitative research method. Also, this method aptly captures the necessary techniques suitable for a study of this nature.

According to Bazeley (2013), and Mason (2013), qualitative research refers to the methods of collecting and analysing data through specific techniques and tools such as interviews, focus groups, observations, discourse analysis, and thematic analysis. In this paper, qualitative data were collected through online observation from Twitter. The observation sheet was used as a guide during the data collection procedure. This process allowed the researcher to focus on specific themes from the Twitter comments, tweets, and retweets. However, the paper was focusing on the trending topics as generated by Twitter users. Furthermore, a purposive sampling technique was employed to select Twitter as the main platform for the online observation (Rafail, 2018). This sampling technique is relevant in this paper because it enables the researcher to purposively focus on specific topics on Twitter. In the South African context,

black Twitter is generally known as a vibrant meta-network that robustly engages on topical issues such as corruption, service delivery, politics, entertainment etc. (Mpofu, 2019; Clark, 2020). However, in the interest of this paper, the focus was on topical issues about service delivery and other relevant engagements between public office bearers and members of the public on Twitter. As such, the failed insurrection that engulfed some parts of KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng generated a number of trending topics on this microblogging site. Accordingly, online observation was used to magnify aspects that had the elements of accountability and trolling as generated during online engagements. The selected hashtags were captured during the collection of data. The common hashtags during the failed insurrection in July 2021 were #JabulaniMall; #Ayikhale; #PhoenixMassacre; #FreeZuma etc. The nature of these hashtags presented the researchers with the attributes of trolling and accountability. Amid the myriad of activities which included looting, violence, and vigilantism some users of Twitter were trolling about these issues. On the other hand, members of the public used Twitter to lament how the South African security cluster failed to act against the culprits of the widespread looting in some malls and business centres in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data.

4. Theoretical Framework

Practice theory is based on moving beyond the old debates about media effects, political economy, the ideological nature of the media (Couldry, 2012). This theory is an extension of media effects, which focuses on the manner in which the public uses media. Thus, Nick Couldry's theory expounds on a need to interrogate the impact of media users on how media operate. Moreover, the previous media theories focused on the impact of media on society (Fourie, 2018). However, practice theory challenges the status quo of audience behaviour (Clark, 2013). This theory is relevant in the context of new media mainly because social media are the main components of new media. The other critical aspect of this theory is that mass media theories were not reviewing how the audience positions itself towards media content. Previously, the short-term and long-term effects theories used media as a lens of audience behaviour. This, therefore, suggests that the audience did not have an influence on how media content is packaged and disseminated

by a few individuals who own and control media. Furthermore, the nature of gatekeeping and censorship did not allow the audience to decide on how they want to use media as the platform of mass communication (Barn, Barn, Raimondi & Mukherjee, 2017). The emphasis of practice theory is on the use of user-generated platforms that refer to social media. As such, social media platforms depend on the users to generate their own content. Therefore, the users or audience set an agenda for social discourse through social media. The audience does not depend on mass media gatekeepers to frame important topics for the public. This means that through social media the audience performs the roles of both gatekeepers and audience. Most importantly, the audience is no longer the passive consumers of media content.

Since social media users create content without any form of censorship, the mass media are compelled to follow the trend of topical issues as they are generated through social media. This theory explicates the importance of media users in the context of new media. In addition, this phenomenon magnifies the paradigm shift in media production and content consumption. This, therefore, accentuates the need to interrogate the new role of media audiences in the 21st century. The 21st century media audience has a plurality of voices through a plethora of channels offered by new media. In this paper, practice theory is used as a lens to analyse the manner in which Twitter users use the microblogging platform as the new fourth estate. Through this platform, the users have direct access to the public office bearers. Thus, the audience does not depend on mass media to engage the public office bearers. As such, some members of the public use Twitter to hold the government accountable. This is one factor that amplifies the cardinal role of new media in the framing of critical issues in the country. It is imperative to expound and analyse this phenomenon. Twitter has the potential to play a watchdog role with minimum censorship and gatekeeping from the owners of the platform.

5. Results and Discussion

Twitter plays a key role as the modern fourth estate particularly amid crisis. The microblogging site enables the public to access the government without any form of interference from the gatekeepers of the mass media. The engagements between tweeps and public office bearers have the potential to ensure that the latter are held accountable. Twitter

has nullified the role of the gatekeepers as it was enforced by the owners and editors of mass media entities. This aspect is pointed out by Patel, (2019), concerning the need to obliterate gatekeepers in public discourse. The use of Twitter as the modern fourth estate has somehow exposed the propaganda role of the mass media. Tweeps through meta-networks always use the platform to expose how some media entities try to control the agenda of the social discourse. As extrapolated in the literature, the owners and editors of news and current affairs programmes are responsible for the framing of the public discourse. However, Twitter and other social media platforms have changed the watchdog role of mass media as some of the topics discussed in the mainstream media are cultivated by social media users. According to Akram and Kumar (2017), social media have capacitated the public to cultivate civilian watchdog function. As much as Twitter has the potential to play a watchdog role in society, it also erodes censorship in the mainstream media.

The microblogging site is an apt alternative to mitigate gatekeeping and censorship. As such, Twitter enables the public to engage about topical issues that are marginalised by mainstream media. This, therefore, extrapolates the interaction between mainstream media and Twitter (Barn, Barn, Raimond & Mukherjee, 2017). Recently, South African mainstream media decided to turn a blind eye on a number of topical issues such as failed insurrection and vaccine hesitancy among South Africans. In the absence of these issues in the mainstream, tweeps shared their views about failed insurrection and vaccine hesitancy. These are two topical issues that stimulated public debate for several weeks. This aspect magnifies that Twitter is an alternative platform to cultivate social discourse. The watchdog role of Twitter has the potential to decimate gatekeeping and censorship in the mainstream.

The use of Twitter as a modern fourth estate challenges mainstream media to consider issues of public interest ahead of agenda-setting approach. Felle (2016) posits that new media in the form of social media create a plurality of voices in the public platforms. Thus, the mainstream media is under pressure to integrate social media commentary in their agenda. In addition, Twitter as a new fourth estate allows the public to share stories and information about poor service delivery, corruption, and other social conundrums. As such, this platform gives the users' *carte blanche* to comment about

prominent issues particularly poor service delivery and corruption. However, the level of freedom on Twitter has adverse effects on social media engagements. Some users of this microblogging site share inflammatory or harmful content.

Twitter as a public platform stimulates a plurality of voices as many people can freely express their views. According to Whipple and Shermak (2020), the public uses Twitter to overtly express their views on topical issues. Moreover, the platform encourages a myriad of users to express their views about a number of issues. The trending topics on Twitter enable the users to acquaint themselves with different opinions. In the past, media users were subjected to a narrow narrative from the gatekeepers. In contrast, meta-networks allow tweeps to openly discuss social conundrums without framing and gatekeeping. The participants in the black Twitter platform share a common interest. As such, they share the same views, values, and norms. This attribute enables the participants to discuss, and magnify critical issues. The same approach is used to engage with public office bearers. However, some public office bearers have the propensity to ignore social media commentary.

The platform is apt for engagements between the public and government officials. The users of the platform have direct access to communicate with the public office bearers. In most cases, the tweeps send direct messages to the Twitter handles of the government officials. Also, the officials have an opportunity and latitude to respond immediately without delay. On the other hand, some government officials depend on their public relations team to rum their social media pages. Although the public does not directly communicate with the specific minister or Member of Parliament, they have access to first-hand information.

The public has a *carte blanche* to respond to the tweets from government officials which promotes accountability. Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2017) aver that Twitter or any form of microblogging site enables the users to challenge the status quo. This is an advantage for the tweeps as the platform allows them to respond and engage tweets immediately. Thus, this aspect stimulates direct communication between tweeps and the public office bearers. Unlike in the past, where the government officials were mainly accessible through mass media with a gatekeeper as the facilitator of the engagements, Twitter

as the new fourth estate enables the tweeps to facilitate online engagements without strict regulations.

Twitter has the potential to encourage mainstream media to improve their editorial policies. With the emergence of Twitter as the new fourth estate, mainstream media is compelled to change the framing of topical issues. Furthermore, Twitter challenges mainstream media to mitigate propaganda and censorship. In other words, the mainstream media is also compelled to use Twitter engagements to generate topics. However, tweeps have the freedom to magnify topical issues from the mainstream media. Thus, this highlights the significance of traditional media in social media engagements. On the other hand, Twitter has the capacity to sharpen the operation of mainstream media. Trolling and cyberbullying have adverse effects on the potential of Twitter as the modern fourth estate (Davis, 2019). The tweeps who deviate from engaging the government by sharing derogatory comments do not encourage constructive debate. According to Siddiqui and Singh (2016), social media platforms possess both positive and negative aspects in online engagements. To a larger extent, trolling and cyberbullying discourage government officials to address critical issues online. Nevertheless, the platform has an option to block trolls. Mostly, trolls and bullies have the propensity to use parody accounts to execute their devious acts. As such, this factor highlights the disadvantage of Twitter as the modern fourth estate.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

According to the online observations undertaken in this research, the government officials are worried about their projected image on Twitter. Therefore, the study recommends that the public should capitalise on Twitter to ensure that government officials are held accountable. Similarly, government officials should effectively use this platform to answer the public's probing questions about the activities of the state. The government officials should see the messages communicated through Twitter as part of transparency and accountability. The tweets as generated by the public directed to the government officials are not always meant to troll the officials, some of them are intended to stimulate accountability on the side of the government. Twitter as a new fourth estate has the capacity to improve accountability among public office bearers. Also, the public office bearers are expected to

find a strategy to handle Twitter engagements. The public plays a surveillance role, and Twitter is one of the platforms where they reflect on some of the topical issues. Accessibility of government officials on social media platforms such as Twitter amplifies the surveillance role of the public. Twitter as a new fourth estate is the extension of the mainstream media as the watchdog role. It is imperative for the public to have other options for the watchdog role. This is the fundamental aspect of any democracy, particularly the young South African democracy. The people are at the forefront of the democratic processes. Undoubtedly, accountability is the cornerstone of any democratic regime. As such, South African government should embrace this key aspect of Batho pele principles. In the context of controlled mainstream media, Twitter is the cardinal platform for open debates about accountability. Immediacy is one of the major aspects of Twitter engagements because the tweets and government officials can immediately respond to the tweets, retweets, and comments generated by the users. This, therefore, emphasises that the platform is the effective channel of public engagements. The users of this platform have the capacity to compel government officials to respond to the public's grievances. The nature of Twitter commentary and online engagements does not need a middleman. Previously, mainstream media's gatekeepers were used as middlemen during public engagements. In contrast, detrimental activities such as trolling and cyberbullying are not constructive in Twitter engagements. The acts of trolls and bullies have the potential to degenerate Twitter as a new fourth estate. The main recommendation is that the government departments should establish social media policies. Additionally, the government's communication strategies should embrace Twitter as a watchdog platform to stimulate accountability. Social media users need to respect online engagements and refrain from trolling and other acts of cyberbullying. There is room for further research in this field. Future studies can work on the role of Twitter as an ideal platform for whistle-blowers. Whistle blowers' voices are silenced in the mainstream media, as such Twitter can amplify whistleblowing in the fight against corruption and other social ills.

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