

New Media, Political Discourse and Public Opinion: A Theoretical Analysis of Social Media Intertextuality and Discursivity and its Effect on Governance in Devolved Political Units in Kenya

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ABSTRACT:

Social media is an essential aspect of socialisation in Kenyan society. Within the context of political discourse, it plays an important role in expanding the democratic space by allowing citizens the space to have their voices heard. Counties are the emerging frontiers for economic and social development in the country. Therefore, it is critical for all citizens to participate equally in governance issues affecting the counties. This research sought to establish the level of citizen engagement in political discussion on social media and how this impacted on governance in the counties. It used a theoretical research approach to examine the various theories and practices of social media in political engagement. Engagement of local citizenry on social media was also assessed. The research was pegged on Habermas Theory on the Public Sphere which posits that, for a public sphere to be adequate and fit-for-purpose for a democratic polity, it must have the capacity for quality interaction and discourse and quantity participation. Key findings: discursivity and intertextuality within the social media environment vastly improve the quality of political participation for citizens. The performance of public spheres within social media sites in the counties says a lot for increased participation of women, youth and minorities in political discourse at the grassroots. Recommendations: social media be inculcated in public policy at the grassroots by including it as a primary conduit of information and civic engagement.

Key Terms: New media, political discourse, public opinion, intertextuality, discursivity.

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Introduction

Social media has often been berated as an unmerited form of social discourse, with its users criticized for engaging in mindless banter at the expense of substantive discussions of social issues that can impact people's lives. In recent times, however, social media has taken a central place in political discourse, not only complementing traditional forms of media but also playing a pivotal role in enhancing citizen participation especially in situations where public dissent is actively discouraged. The context within which social media chatter takes place is at the critical intersection between the areas where political discourse as text meets both society and media analysis. In this regard, social media's immersive environment provides a focusing point where the intertextuality of political discourse within different contexts – media talk and social engagements into the broader society – are further dissected and interrogated for a more nuanced understanding of events happening within the society.

Social media further enlivens political discussion through its inclusivity and ubiquity, giving everyone a fair chance at having a say in the events that are occurring around them. It is the great equaliser of public opinion where every user has the same opportunity of being heard through a platform that does not discriminate against any social parameter, for example, gender, social status, or level of education. Of greater relevance is its discursive nature, where topics are allowed to veer off-tangent referencing to many other events and contexts beyond the main topic of discussion, thereby creating an environment where different perspectives, experiences, and contexts draw upon and benefit from one another in a bid to provide a more layered context within which events can be understood and meaning created.

While the capacity for this nascent technology to create divisions and sow discontent within the society is not underrated, its capacity for giving voice to the voiceless

and giving context to discussions can also not be gainsaid. Overall, the benefits of having a platform that ensures that everybody in a democratic society has an equal voice and can make sense of political occurrences in real time far outweigh the concerns over some negative aspects of its use especially in a developing country that is trying to solidify its democratic foundations such as Kenya. This research is a theoretical analysis of the discursive and intertextual nature of social media and how they affect political discourse in social media forums in devolved units in Kenya. Kenyan society is in the grips of a social media conundrum. The ubiquity of the technology and its effects on people's lives is manifested by the sheer numbers of people on social media and its impact on daily interaction, both negative and positive, and it is increasingly becoming difficult whether to glorify or vilify its use. The emergence of the Smartphone, the deepening of internet connectivity and the expansion of the democratic space over the years means that anyone who has anything to say, helpful to society or not, can say it with a few strikes on the keyboard and tap on the "Send" button. It is no wonder, then, that we are lately coming to terms with emergent concepts like "post-truth", "fake news", and "alternative facts" in a society that has come to embrace, without much ado, the "news-as-it-breaks" phenomenon often devoid of context, relevance, or indeed, much truth when put in perspective.

Transcending the negatives of the new realities presented by a nascent technology, however, it would be disingenuous not to acknowledge the impact and relevance social media has and will unrelentingly continue to bear, especially when it comes to matters of great importance, locally or nationally. What has happened is that, as with any other disruptive technology, social media has deconstructed traditional information-flow pathways thereby providing new avenues and contexts for consumption, sense-making, and meaning creation in relation to mass media content as well as to what every event means when extrapolated within the broader

context of national interest (Calderaro, 2014). This has altered the deployment of political discourse especially at localised levels that were previously underserved by national media outlets and turned social media into a major driving force for the public agenda (Zappavigna, 2012).

Social media chatter has transcended its indistinctive online nature to become a corporeal form of social discourse with tremendous political capital, and ordinary citizens are noticing its importance in driving public policy and advancing the democratic agenda not only in Kenya but across the world. In the United States of America, the 2008 presidential elections provided a sneak preview of the front-and-centre role social media would play in national politics, with studies showing that collaborative content generation by users rather than by institutions – a phenomenon known as "participatory web" – would transform politics and provide an impetus to civic participation in the political process (Zappavigna, 2012). In Ethiopia, social media has been used side-by-side with traditional forms of media to try to force the government to accede to citizen demands and expand the free space (Gagliardone & Pohjonen, 2016). In China, sites such as Sina Weibo and Tumblr have been used as avenues of expression in a society that has clamped-down hard on open forms of public dissent (Jiang, 2016).

The discursive nature of texts within the social media environment has diversified the information-flow pathways, thereby providing for more open forums for social expression, the unregulated consumption of content, an unfiltered sense-making of events, and a non-coercive form of meaning-creation that is well beyond the ambits of traditional institutionally-guarded mass mediated uptake pathways. According to Jiang (2016), social media provides citizens with avenues for civic engagement and political participation, with content that can be continuously updated and promptly and that require little effort, time and money as opposed to traditional media

such as newspapers, TV, and radio. Contributors to social media sites can also consume the online version of offline content timely and also generate original content that might create new avenues for political engagement (Jiang, 2016). This scenario has altered the contexts within which political discourse has always been deployed and understood.

Statement of the Problem

Within the context of Kenyan society, this phenomenon is more greatly manifest within the context of its devolved units, where the traditional concepts of relevance, immediacy, and proximity that have always defined news content are significantly brought to bear about localised events and their import. This study focuses on the discursive and intertextual nature of social media interaction in relation to traditional forms of news media and how this immersive cognitive environment is helping citizens make better sense of political events that affect them and participate in the political process within the counties, thereby strengthening governance in the devolved units over the long term.

Objectives of the Study

This is theoretical research that aims at establishing how political discussions take place within the social media environment in Kenya and how this affects public participation in and governance and issues of public policy in the counties. It also addresses itself to the research question: **"How do discussions take place in social media and how does this affect public participation in governance issues in the counties?"**

Significance of the Study

Most of the current research in media and political discourse in Kenya have focused on the effects of traditional media in guiding public perception. This research focuses on discussion forums within social media groups in the devolved units in Kenya and how these

discussions helped increase public participation in issues affecting public policy and governance at the grassroots level. The results of the research will help in guiding public policy surrounding subjects of social media use and how its discursive and intertextual environment can be harnessed to deepen political inclusivity, enhance democracy, and strengthen governance within the devolved units in Kenya.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study focuses on the nature of political engagements and discussions on social media sites in Kenya and how people have used these forums to engage their county governments in key political issues. It is theoretical research that is founded on New Media Theory and focuses on desk-based research. Online discussion forums that are based in and focus on county politics are also studied for nuance and context. While the research focuses on the online discussions of issues and the reactions to events, it did not delve into individual perspectives on what was being discussed.

Definition of Terms

Intertextuality – The cognitive environment within which text is understood about other texts, for meaning and sense-making purposes. It is “a dynamic site in which relational processes and practices are the focus of analysis instead of static structures and products” (Alfaro, 1996, p. 268). Text (word, concept, idea, artefact etc) derives meaning and is understood in relation to other texts within a social context.

Discursivity – The nature of discourse to take on different contexts and sub-themes at the same time and within the same context as the main discussion.

Social Media - Websites and applications that allow users to create content and to connect and network with other users.

New Media – Means of mass communication using digital media such as the Internet

Intertextuality in the Era of New Media

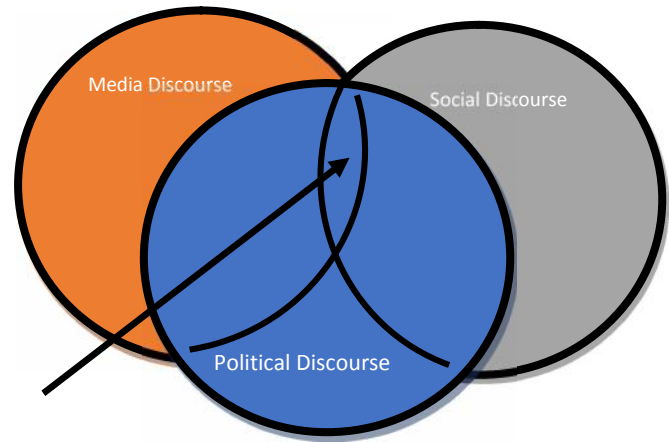
Intertextuality was a term first coined by Julia Kristeva in the mid-60s to conceptualise text as a site of the active interplay between different and relational processes and practices (Alfaro, 1996). It is a post-modern concept that visualises the understanding of words, ideas, events or artefacts as happening within the context of an interwoven, cross-relational production process of other words, ideas, events and artefacts that it both derives meaning from and lends meaning to (Allen, 2011). In this regard, a word does not stand on its meaning but derives this from the particular context within which it is used, in relation to other words that have been said before it and other words that might be said after it. It stands within a network of different interactions and processes that lends meaning within the context that it has been used. Events and occurrences similarly draw meaning from their context and past and future events (Allen, 2011).

Within this post-modern construct, history is a function of its meaning within the present context and the texts through which its vision is availed to those presently alive: “the past is only known to us through its textualised traces... history... becomes a form of complex intertextual cross-references that operates within... its unavoidably discursive context” (Allen, 2011, p. 186). According to Still and Worton (1990), texts cannot appear as self-sufficient concepts or closed systems because they operate within an ecosystem of shared understanding of their meaning in relation to other texts. For example, the writer of a word is himself a reader of other words and, therefore, his conception of the words that he has written will be suffused in terms of meaning and context, with references, quotations, and influences of others. Secondly, a text is only available through some process of access to similar text through which understanding of the current text is made (Still & Worton, 1990).

Intertextuality subsumes elements of subservience and interdependence of texts with one another. It exists within

the discursive metacontext of Socratic dialogism, where dialogues “are usually meandering and inconclusive discussions lacking overall unity and characterised by their digressive and playful tone” (Alfaro, 2011, p. 268). The plurality of voices, perspectives, experiences, and notions adds credence to the process of truth-seeking in Plato’s dialogism, a process that is central to the discursive themes to be found within intertextual communications. Concerning social media, for instance, intertextuality and discursivity of the mass-mediated environment create a forum where new information is gained and knowledge crystallised through interactions of different viewpoints, perspectives, and experiences.

Within the new media environment, intertextuality is a central characteristic of online communications, which tend to be immersive, non-restrictive, unregulated and unsupervised. These characteristics are especially important components in the acquisition of unfiltered information from a diverse range of sources and the contribution to that information by providing one’s own opinion of the stories, newer versions based on previous experience, reference and comparison. Within the context of political discourse, this helps to crystallise knowledge that can be used as political capital to barter with specific requests or demands from the leadership. The figure below depicts the cross-relational interplay between social discourse, political discourse, and media discourse. At the intersection of these three types of discourses is the intertextual environment within which conversation on social media takes place (indicated by the arrow).



Herbamas’ Public Sphere Theory

At the cusp of European Enlightenment, when decreasing ignorance amongst the populace sought to overthrow the erstwhile monarchical political order of divine dominion of the ruler over the ruled with the new understanding that the ruler was not a divine overlord but, in fact, owed his authority to the ruled by way of a Hobbesian “social contract” (Graham, 2013, p.30), German philosopher Jurgen Herbamas sought to clarify the nature of this “contract”, how it is bargained within public discourse and the manner of its deployment as an instrument of political democracy. He came up with the concept of the “public sphere”, as eruditely explicated in his seminal treatise, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, where he explained this notion as “the sphere of private people come together as a public”, unregulated and distanced from the public authorities, and whose aim is to “engage themselves in a debate in the general rules governing relations in a basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labour (Herbamas, 1991, p.27).

Herbamas' views are particularly relevant to a nascent democracy struggling with the nature of public opinion, how it is configured, and its eventual deployment in policy-making such as the Kenyan society as currently constituted. Of critical importance to Herbamas was the nature of social conditions necessary to engage in rational-critical debates about public issues conducted by private citizens willing to let arguments and not statuses determine decisions (Calhoun, 1992). Herbamas' theory, in a nutshell, argues that for a public sphere to be adequate and fit-for-purpose for a democratic polity, it must have the capacity for quality interaction and discourse and quantity participation (Calhoun, 1992). This, therefore, gives us two yardsticks for measuring a fit-for-purpose public sphere in a democratic polity – quality discourse and widespread participation.

Lee (1992) introduces an interesting third aspect to the nature of the public sphere – textuality and mediation. Textuality has to do with the inherent characteristic of a given text, including its performance environment and the different contexts within which it is viewed and understood. Within the digital environment, textuality has to do with the interactivity of the site as well as its technical aesthetics. Lee (1992) avers that the print-mediated textual environment that constituted the earlier bourgeois public sphere with its propensity for self-abstraction or subjective withdrawal from the state-of-being (class, gender, culture etc.) has been replaced by the “embodied sensibilities of self-realization characteristic of a modern, consumerist, mass-mediated public sphere” (p.406).

This immersive nature of the emergent public sphere, far from eroding the quintessence of the bourgeois constitution as averred by Herbamas, improves upon public engagement by opening up new fronts for elucidation and abstraction of new and old ideas within ongoing political discourse (Lee, 1992). Extrapolated to the modern-day era of new media, the inherent intertextuality vastly improves

discussions by adding verve and character to the discourse. Experiences and perspectives pitted against each other in the argument within their differing contexts redeem rather than diminishes the initial yardsticks for the constitution of a workable public sphere – discourse quality and widespread participation comprised of as divergent a viewpoint as possible.

Discussion

It is clear from the preceding that discursivity and intertextuality within the social media environment vastly improve the quality of political participation for citizens. Within the Kenyan context, a nascent democracy still trying to build on the quality of public discourse, emergent public spheres within the social media environment would be important in encouraging broader inclusivity and participation while remaining mindful of the different sensibilities that characterise the different social and cultural contexts that participants derive their knowledge and experiences from. The performance of public spheres within social media sites in the counties says a lot for increased participation of women, youth and minorities in political discourse at the grassroots.

Politics at the counties have greater relevance for local audiences owing to reach and immediacy of political action and public policy pronouncements. Debates within county government assemblies and the attendant decisions have a direct impact on the quality of lives for residents and, once implemented, have an immediate effect that can be felt overnight on the quality of living. It is, therefore, critical for most citizens and political observers at the local levels to understand and participate in debates to help push for effective public policies that will help the ordinary person in the streets. Social media offers a platform for discussion that gives voice to every citizen to be heard. Politicians, members of county assemblies and governors alike, also need to reach out to their constituents to galvanise popular support for some of their initiatives.

Facebook and Twitter have formed a natural part of political engagement in the counties, where debates are lively and protracted, if sometimes petty and pointless. This, however, forms part of the variety of opinion that makes social media such an important platform for public engagement. Another aspect of this is the formation of digital publications that are primarily pushed through social media. These have highly localised content that relate well with the needs of the citizenry within the counties. While at a nascent stage of development and, therefore, copying mainly from the formats of traditional print publications borrowed from the national newspapers, these publications have the potential to be the harbingers of a new dawn of information dissemination to aid in civic education and public enlightenment on political processes in the counties. These are private businesses and in future might benefit substantially from increased revenues from advertisements from local businesses once their demand improves at the local level.

Of more considerable significance to this argument is the visible presence of many local politicians on social media. Most governors, senators and members of county assemblies have social media pages that help them to reach out to their constituents. These pages are the front for lively discussions and engagements, exemplified by the flurry of activity within their comment sections. Furthermore, citizen groups have organised themselves to open social media pages lobbying for varied interests within the counties. The ability of social media to link these pages to those of other individuals, political groups, and politicians creates a though ecosystem that allows for lively and engaging interactions between different ideas within the counties.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Social media has a central place to play in Kenyan politics due to its ability to equalise debates by giving every

interlocutor an equal voice. The devolved political units have been touted as the key to widespread economic and social development in the country by decentralising resource planning and dissemination from the national to the local level, where decisions best suit localised experiences and needs. For the expected economic take-off to happen, citizens at the grassroots level must be equipped with the necessary knowledge to be able to take part in governance within the counties. Such knowledge comes from owning information and news that can be obtained with as little constraints in terms of time, money, and effort as possible.

The emergence of the smartphone and the depth of internet penetration has enabled many Kenyans to have access to varied information sources. The divergence of opinions, experiences, and cultural perspectives that is available on social media allows the platform to offer participants unique insights into different ideas and concepts that expand the knowledge base critical to having an informed citizenry at the counties. Social media, unlike traditional media, can take the discussion down divergent and referential paths (discursivity), offering interlocutors a milieu of possibilities on conflict resolution. It also enriches the debate, rather than diminishes quality, because it captures other subtleties and nuances that could otherwise not be captured in a straight-laced and moderated argument.

This research recommends that social media be taught in public policy at the grassroots by including it as a primary conduit of information and civic engagement. The study could not delve into other extraneous factors that would affect the debate, either by delimiting access or silencing individuals, such as gender, race, culture, or level of education. A possible area of further research would be how other factors affect debate within social media public spheres, and how these could be mitigated to enliven the

discussion and strengthen public participation in
governance issues at the grassroots level.

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