


Chapter 29

Analysis of Discourses on WhatsApp Coup Reported in the Media: The Case of Malawi

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ABSTRACT

Use of social media applications has become popular in the context of developing countries. Social media are transforming the way individuals and organisations communicate and interact in their social settings. This paper presents a critical analysis of discourses on use of WhatsApp among opposition party politicians. Using the case of Malawi, the study analysed media reports and government documents using critical social theory. The findings showed power relations issues related to domination, communication distortions, and conflict of interests in the social and political discourses. Further, the study highlighted the effects of absence and outdated laws and legal frameworks in dealing with emerging use of new technologies in political activities (e.g., use of WhatsApp) in the context of a developing country. The study makes recommendations for policymakers and law enforcement agencies in addressing challenges related to the use and regulation of new technologies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media applications are “the means of interactions among people in which they communicate, collaborate and share information online in a social dialogue as creators of user-generated content in a virtual community” (Sobaih, Moustafa, Ghandforoush, & Khan, 2016: 295). The use of social media applications has become popular and serves individuals, communities, businesses and government in gathering, sharing, processing and storage of information. Examples of social media applications in-

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clude Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, Google Plus, Vibe, WeChat and Hangouts (Gournelos, 2015; Taddiken, 2014). Social media has also become one of the primary means of communication in both business and communities. In developing countries context, social media are being used to support political ends such as political engagement, civic participation, social movements and activism (Aman & Jayroe, 2013; Mare, 2018). For instance, in the wake of the Arab springs, researchers have attempted to unravel the use of social media in cases that resulted in regime change (Aman & Jayroe, 2013; Bruns, Highfield & Burgess, 2013).

There is substantial and growing research on how individuals, groups and communities use social media for political ends in the context of African countries (Mare, 2018; Mutsvairo & Harris, 2016; Steenkamp, & Hyde-Clarke, 2014). For example, use of social media for individuals and organisations outside the structures of government to influence people and manage demonstration against regimes or governments. The study takes the debate further to look at the use of social media in the political processes for opposition political party members represented in parliament. We argue that in democratic systems of government in Africa, opposition political parties play important roles in consolidating and upholding democratic values. The opposition political parties provide balances and checks to the incumbent government and ensuring that the government is accountable and deliver the promises made to the electorate during the election campaign. There is limited understanding of how the opposition political parties are using social media to perform their roles. Unfortunately, most studies in this area have highlighted the use of applications such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs (Bohler-Muller & Van der Merwe, 2011; Mare, 2018; Steenkamp & Hyde-Clarke, 2014).

This study contributes towards literature on the use of social media for political purposes and analysed the power relations in the use of WhatsApp as an example of social media application. Using the case of Malawi, we highlight the taken for granted assumptions on use of WhatsApp and highlight the issues of domination, communication distortions and conflict of interests among political stakeholders reported in the media. The study was guided by the research question: How does the use of social media affect power relations amongst political stakeholders? To answer this question, we draw concepts from Critical Social Theory (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000) to highlight power relations issues among politicians when using social media platforms.

The study was useful in offering insights on the dilemma of issues of freedom of speech and privacy in the context of an African country. While social media has become popular in supporting communication and democratic values for freedom of speech, there are also unintended consequences in the unregulated use of social media which the existing legal frameworks fail to support. The study raises some of the power relations issues on the regulation of new technologies and that policymakers and legislators should take corrective actions to ensure that social media use upholds social values, law and order and promote freedom for all.

The rest of the paper is presented as follows. Section 2 summarises the background to the study. Section 3 highlights the theoretical underpinning of the study. Section 4 presents summarises the research methodology. Section 5 presents the summary of results. Section 6 discusses the findings. Section 7 summarises the conclusions drawn from the study.

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