



## Economic and Socio-political Views of Online Participants in Online Political Commentary during the 2014 South African General Elections

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**ABSTRACT** This paper seeks to look at economic and socio-political issues discussed by online participants in online news forums leading to the 2014 South African general elections. A qualitative content analysis was used to analyse viewers' comments about economic and socio-political issues discussed by online participants during the 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 and Guardian, Independent Newspapers, Caxton CTP, and TNA Media were selected. The study employed a purposive sampling technique and 1000 comments were extracted. The sample began four weeks before the election and ended two weeks after the event. NVIVO 11 was utilized to code these readers' comments into their respective categories. The findings revealed that participants have different perspectives on different economic and socio-political matters such as slate politics, and cadre deployment, economic meltdown.

### INTRODUCTION

Online discussion of political and social issues has occurred over many interactive channels, including of note UseNet (Davis 1999), bulletin boards (Holt 2004; Brundidge 2006), e-mail, and chat rooms (Brundidge 2006). Within online discussion research, some scholars argue that Internet communication serves as an excellent portal for debate among persons of varied opinions and beliefs. Holt (2004) stated:

*"The ability of the internet to unite those of disparate backgrounds has great potential for fostering debate and discussion of issues in the civic arena. In many cases, differences of opinion about, for example, political issues arise from lack of familiarity with the perspectives of other people"* (Holt 2004: 14).

Research has shown that, online political discussion does serve to expose participants to non-likeminded partners (Brundidge 2006). Yet, despite the potential of the internet to bring opposing camps together in a common (cyber) space and provide exposure to different ideas, some evidence suggests that this may not necessarily be occurring. The structure of the internet has been found to offer conditions particularly conducive to selective exposure to media

content (Bimber and Davis 2003). It has also been established that, individuals favour news and information that aligns with their own views (Mutz and Martin 2001; Bimber and Davis 2003; Best et al. 2005). Along this vein, some evidence indicates that selective exposure also occurs in online political discussion arenas which may lead to political polarization. For example, scholars have noted that virtual communities are fairly homogeneous in terms of values and viewpoints (Dahlberg 2001).

The authors are of the view that, participants in online discussions often hold comparable political perspectives and tend to engage in civil conversations with those who agree with their views. This view is in line with the findings of Davis (1999) who found from his seminal study of 'UseNet' that persons engaging in online political newsgroup discussion tended to "gravitate to groups agreeing with their own views." Davis concluded that "UseNet discussion must be viewed for what it is a means for reinforcing pre-existing views rather than a virtual community where people can freely express their differing views with each other ...." Thus, online communities may serve to insulate groups from those with whom they disagree (Davis 1999: 162). Despite evidence suggesting otherwise, it is

unlikely that online political discussion enhances exposure to different viewpoints, there is potential for online discussion to lead persons of contrasting viewpoints to engage in online discussion. In his study of online political discussion and heterogeneity among participants' discussion networks, Brundidge (2006) concluded that individuals use the control the internet affords them to "seek out likeminded partners for political discussion but to [sic] do not comparably avoid non-likeminded partners when they are inadvertently exposed to them" (Brundidge 2006: 21). To that end, this paper seeks to look at the economic and socio-political views of online participants in online political commentary during the 2014 South African general elections. This is as motivated by the fact that online discussions have of late been found to be platforms where people are free to express their views and have saved as a contribution to the development of the nation.

### Objectives of the Study

- ◆ To establish if there are any economic and socio-political issues discussed by the online readers during the South African 2014 general elections
- ◆ To establish the concerns discussed by the online readers during the South African 2014 general elections

### The Context

The authors are of the view that it is of paramount importance to note how individuals interact once they have come together in an online discussion forum. This is on the backdrop of previous research into online political discourse which illuminated a theme of uncivil behaviour by disagreeing participants. In his writings, Davis (1999) concluded that, political discussion on online forums favoured brazen behaviour resulting in "vigorous attack and humiliation" on the less assertive. Davis found that the polite and respectful become discouraged from participation and the discussion becomes controlled exclusively by the belligerent. Such acts of attack have become known as flaming, a term used to describe posts made in online discussion that personally attack another poster or

the poster's ideas (Davis 1999: 163). The presence of flaming in online political discussion has been reported at varying levels by scholars, with some research pointing to pervasive and disruptive levels of flaming (Hill and Hughes 1998; Davis 1999) and other research attributing less prominence to flaming behaviour (Rafaeli and Sudweeks 1997).

In this paper, the authors noted that, one culprit of uncivil discussion is anonymity. This is in line with other researchers who have noted that, anonymity affords users a level of freedom and power to act in an uncivil manner as well as avoid being held accountable for their statements (see Barber et al. 1997; Streck 1998; Davis 1999). Boyd and Ellison (2007) also noted that, all online deliberators create discrete profiles which consist of an ever-growing array of features and which are personalized by displaying photos, personal descriptions and much more. Once a user joins a group, the affiliation is noted in their profile (unless the group is secret or unless the user chooses not to disclose that affiliation). In addition, their profile image appears in the "group members" section of the group profile. Depending on the level of privacy members have selected for their individual profiles, group members may then view other members' profiles. If an entry is made to the group discussion, a member's profile image, along with full name and network affiliation, is displayed (Boyd and Ellison 2007). Baron (2008) on the same note noted that, network affiliation is most likely a high school or university, but since being opened up in 2006 to anyone with an e-mail address this can also feature employer, country or city.

Baron (2008) further argued that, this is unlike other forms of asynchronous chat online where identifying information is often restricted to merely screen names or icons. It is on this note that the researchers noted that, the names, images and networks displayed in online chat could be false or only partially realistic. However, the amount of information available about individuals participating in discussions may not affect discourse in this unique space. Knowing that participants in a group discussion can access at the very least the name, photograph and network affiliation of a messenger may produce a sense of accountability. Because exchange in group discussion incorporates profile informa-

tion, and not simply an anonymous screen name, persons engaging in discussion may feel a greater sense of interpersonal interaction. On the other hand, identifying information may be used as a source for *ad hominem* attacks, particularly in instances where the discussion has devolved to uncivil arguments. It is noteworthy that in this study, the researchers could not discredit the issue of anonymity enjoyed by online deliberators because there are no specific rules that forces an online commenter to expose/reveal their identity. It is the assumption of the researchers that anonymity makes online political commentary interesting for one is not afraid of victimisation hence they have the liberty to express themselves freely.

### **The Promotion of Online Public Discussions and Comments**

Personal, interactive and informal discussions are promoted on online commentary forums by private or public citizens who informally gather to discuss issues pertaining to their day to day lives as published by different media houses (Hauser 1999; Strandberg and Berg 2013: 133). The researchers are of the opinion that, these platforms provoke public discussions and acts as a premeditated platform for readers to interact. Hence, Hyland and Paltridge (2001: 1) noted that, dialogue is all about the traditions of how “language works in our engagements with the world and our connections with others, thereby creating and shaping the socio-political and cultural formations of our societies”. On the same note Calhoun (1992), Sellers (2004) and Chan et al. (2014) argued that, public discussion is a combined action of involvement in discussions on public forums where citizens have a right to participate with freedom of speech and expression. Mummery and Rodan (2013) further argued that, it is these citizens who form a discursive community that emerges consciously to discuss political, economic and social problems that exist in different states.

The scenery of the discursive communities affords each and every member a chance to contribute their own subjective or objective opinions that may deliberately criticize or eulogize any government (Mummery and Rodan 2013). Contemporary mass media through the Informa-

tion and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has “provided a new epoch of new media, signaling abundant possibilities for citizen journalism” (Banda 2010: 9). Citizens influence journalists who study their discourse, thus generating a discursive community which influences journalists to learn about their perceptions and this is known as citizen journalism (Chung 2008: 660). Citizen journalism is regarded as “an individual or a group without involvement from paid and trained professionals” (Nip 2006: 218). These citizens are individuals without any collaboration with the habitual journalism, they just develop the available communication platforms to report to one another (Domingo et al. 2008; Hermida and Thurman 2008; Rosen 2008). The insinuation of this is that citizen journalists research, gather, process, analyses, publish and report news and information, most often utilizing array of technologies made possible by the internet. Lewis et al. (2010) noted that, the availability of new media has to some extent minimized and even opposed the norm of gatekeeping in journalism that curtails news content (see also Ross and Cormier 2010: 66).

The interactivity of readers on news sites promotes a propinquity of news consumption and this enables journalists to learn about their audience’s perceptions instantaneously (Chung 2008: 660). However, the trend of interactivity “is now changing to participatory journalism for it captures the idea of collaborative and collective action and not a mere exchange of ideas” (Thilaka and Natarajan 2012: 117). This makes participatory journalism and citizen journalism to be close in form. It is noteworthy that, participatory journalism involves news users who are given a chance to share their perspectives thus affording professional journalists a chance to utilize news produced by the audience (Nip 2006: 218). This can be viewed in other contexts as an opportunity for audience to act as news agents, for they set the agenda, and discuss issues as agenda setters thus by determining the agenda setting, they act as news producers (Domingo et al. 2008: 335). These online discussions have aroused scholarly debate and empirical research studies (Strandberg and Berg 2013).

Scholars noted that, online discussions are significant platforms for citizen deliberations

(Banda 2010; Ross and Cormier 2010; Lewis et al. 2010). Although empirical studies dispute the online discussion as void of true deliberation, the discussion forums remain significant as public spheres (Strandberg and Berg 2013). The public deliberation refers to readers' involvement into public discussions necessarily for problem solving (Manosevitch and Walker 2009: 2). These public spheres influence gatekeepers or journalists who study the discussions, "track reader's behaviour", and incline to select news stories that suit "readers' content preferences" (Shoemaker 1996: 80; Vu 2014: 2). Santana (2011) also noted that, online comments have been so useful to news reporters. Thus commenters have challenged reporters to re-examine the news worthiness of a topic and have also provoked them to think of new and different stories to tell while pressurizing them to adopt a creative way of telling stories (Santana 2011). In another study Karlsson (2011) also noted that, readers play different roles such as to criticise misleading headlines. Karlsson (2011) analysed the readers' comments posted on four Swedish newspapers about the swine flu news reports. The study discovered that readers' comments are so effective in the dominant media and influence the writing of news (Karlsson 2011).

Shoemaker (1991: 79) noted that, readers' discussion forums have been influential on journalists or the media and have somehow reduced the role of gatekeepers. Gatekeeping occurs when journalists select "what to write and what to include and what to leave out". Traditional media as gatekeepers, select or decide on whether or not "to allow a particular news report, to pass through the 'gates' of a news medium into the news channels" (McQuail 2010: 309). Gatekeeping is further described as "writing, editing, positioning, scheduling, repeating and messaging information to become news" (Shoemaker et al. 2008: 73). This means that journalists cannot write everything and publish all the received stories, meaning "some selection of news items is necessary" (Shoemaker 1991: 80). The news stories are selected to fit into the space available in the newspaper. The media gatekeepers have been non-transparent and over-determined on the selection of stories for publication, which were not questioned by the public (Goode 2009). Journalists were "aloof from their audiences in

the context of traditional media" (MacGregor 2007; Vu 2014: 3). In learning from their audiences, the media organisations used to depend on letters to the editor and radio phone-in programmes (Wahl-Jorgensen 2001: 303-304). This had limited influence on news producers and editors for them to "adjust their daily editorial decision making" (Shoemaker and Reese 1996: 105).

### **Discursive Spaces, User Engagement and Perspectives on Public Platforms**

Studies have been focusing on analyzing readers' annotations featuring on online news articles (Abdul-Mageed 2008; Singer 2009; Manosevitch and Walker 2009; Diakopoulos and Naaman 2011; Milioni et al. 2012; Ajiboye 2013; Henrich and Holmes 2013). These studies explore the role of discursive spaces and user engagement on public platforms coupled with their perspectives. Singer (2009) employed a content analysis of user's comments on three Scottish newspapers. Singer's aim was to understand the political discourse and to identify online political communities and their characteristics. The findings showed that discursive spaces enable users from different areas to come together and debate on issues of common interest, while at the same time serve as channels for social interaction and community building (Singer 2009).

In another study, Ajiboye (2013) examined the discursive strategies in online news feedback platforms and how they influence readers' ideological perspectives. The data comprised of 201 readers' comments derived from online news media reports on two socio-political crises in Nigeria. Ajiboye discovered that, readers as social beings form a discursive community that plays a role in building social attitudes and public opinions (Ajiboye 2013). They share common knowledge derived from a social context as they inform one another (Ajiboye 2013). Their discourse is determined by the socio-political events and circumstances. Readers as social actors make use of ideological strategies such as polarization, generalization and hyperbole as they interact (Ajiboye 2013). Milioni et al. (2012) applied a content analysis to readers' comments in Greek online mass media and they found out that, user engagement in raising new issues and

arguments is very low. Readers rather discuss issues of common interest that have been released in the news articles (Miloni et al. 2012).

Manosevitch and Walker (2009) used content analysis to analyse the readers' comments posted within the opinion pages of two major regional American newspapers. They established that, the involvement of readers in public discourse shows the aspiration for public interaction in most cases and that readers spend hours debating and responding to one another and they engage in political discussion. Manosevitch and Walker (2009: 2) postulate that, readers' comments are "analytic and supportive of social order". Their comments are essential for public deliberation and can be taken into contemplation for solving political or social problems. Manosevitch and Walker (2009: 21) noted that, readers' comments offer information that is factual and rational. Manosevitch and Walker (2009: 21) also discovered that, some "commenters engage in discussions for more than one point in its lifecycle" while some commenters stay online and comment in real time. Manosevitch and Walker (2009: 21) further noted that, "some commenters respond to each other by direct reference to username or by responding to questions raised, clarify positions or follow up with information".

Similar to the above argument, the researchers noted that, the online commenters' usernames are identical and common among commenters and that, readers do not just criticize one another but they also address each other, raise questions and share additional sources of information in a dignified way. Diakopoulos and Naaman (2011) mainly studied the readers' comments on SacBee.com news articles and discovered that news sites are increasingly changing to become platforms for communities to discuss and address common issues that affect the general populace. In most situations, the discourse of readers' comments reflects the nature of topicality, tensions and different perspectives within online communities. Hence Diakopoulos and Naaman (2011) pointed out that, journalists and readers at times view the quality of online comments as sometimes offensive with the potential to arouse counter responses or insults.

Abdul-Mageed (2008) on the other hand investigated readers' comments on *Al Jazeera* news site and found that readers comment on

the site regularly on different stories and that the news articles focus on themes mostly related to military and political, foreign relations, and covered events related to the Arab world (Abdul-Mageed 2008). Henrich and Holmes (2013: 1) pointed out that, readers respond to other readers' comments online recurrently. They further noted that readers' comments are "a rich source of qualitative data that reflect public opinion and provide insight into how decisions are made and beliefs formed" (Henrich and Holmes 2013: 1). Readers may also correct what they believe to be misinformation in other comments, argue as they support ideas, share websites links with relevant information and provide factual information (Schuth et al. 2007). Their attitude is shown through clicking on either like or dislike on the comment. However these comments "cannot be taken as representative of the views of the general population" but instead the high number of comments available reflect the opinion of a large segment of the population (Henrich and Holmes 2013: 2).

Strandberg and Berg (2013) examined whether readers' comments in a Finnish newspaper website represent democratic discourse. They used content analysis as method to analyse 300 reader comments in a timeframe of three weeks. The findings of their research indicated that some readers' comments reflect a democratic and non-democratic conversation. Mcmillen (2013: iii) explored the "deliberative properties of social interaction in online comment thread." The sample of the study was collected from three different online news sites the *hill.com*, *nation.com*, and *the nationalreview.com*. The research findings stated that online comments reflect "evidence of informal conversational style" (Mcmillen 2013: iii). The study discovered three common themes of social interaction which are "tolerance for hostility, encouraging quality debate and a value of information exchanges" (Mcmillen 2013: iii).

### **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 gov-



ernment-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) observed 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) argued 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 Earl (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. Referring to the work of Sampson, Cvetkovich and Earle (1994: 174) argue 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 following 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 on information that will, in due course, impact on the other modes of participation either to change or to sustain prevailing modes.

### **The Online Readers' Discussion Community**

The online readers' discussion community forms subjective opinions and these valuable subjective judgments have an impact on shaping public opinions and general social attitudes (Ajiboye 2013). Readers form a discursive community that plays a role in building social attitudes and public opinions. They share common knowledge derived from a social context as they inform one another about different socio-political issues (Ajiboye 2013). It is on this backdrop that Ajiboye (2013) noted that, readers make use of ideological strategies such as division, simplification and exaggeration so as to shape other readers' attitudes and judgments.

Diakopoulos and Naaman (2011) also renowned that, the online discourse reflects a scenery of topicality, meaning readers could discuss issues from one topic to the other. However, Readers can insult one another, correct what they believe to be propaganda in other comments, generate their own arguments as they support ideas, share websites with relevant information and may go as far as providing factual information (Schuth et al. 2007). Their annotations are in addition "a rich source of qualitative data that reflect public opinions and provide insight into how decisions are made and beliefs formed" (Henrich and Holmes 2013: 1). It is however important to note at this stage that, some readers' comments reflect a democratic conversation on one hand and non-democratic on the other hand.

### **METHODOLOGY**

A corpus of all commentary appended to 2014 South African general election news reports published online by Media24, Times Media Group, Mail and Guardian, Independent Newspapers, Caxton CTP, and TNA Media were selected. The study employed a purposive sampling technique and 1000 comments were extract-

ed. The sample began four weeks before the election and ended two weeks after the event. NVIVO 11 was utilized to code these readers' comments into their respective categories.

### **Procedure**

Qualitative content analysis on texts was used; this involves the coding of data, the interpretation and classification of readers' comments into their thematic categories. In this paper, qualitative content analysis is taken as an "approach of pragmatic, methodological controlled scrutiny of texts within their parameter of communication, following content analytical rules and step by step models, without rash quantification" (Mayring 2000: 5). The applicability of qualitative content analysis also encompasses the coding of raw data into conceptually possible categories (Hsieh and Shannon 2005; Elo and Kynegas 2008). Explicitly for this paper, the raw data are the readers' comments on news forums leading up to the 2014 South African general elections extracted online.

Qualitative content analysis focuses on objects such as the discourses, video tapes, and documents. However, in this paper the themes are derived from the contextual meanings which are taken as prime content while the contextual information, the news headlines and the readers' comments are taken as underlying content. This paper adopts the writings of Mayring (2000) and Finfgeld-Connect (2014) on the procedures of qualitative content analysis. The procedures of qualitative content analysis are built upon the foundation of quantitative content analysis. "The explicit use of qualitative text analysis made possible by preserving the "advantages" of quantitative content analysis" (Mayring 2000: 6-7). The first process is based on "fitting of material into a model of communication" (Mayring 2000). This means that comments extracted online were purposively selected in order to fulfill the objectives of the study and infer their contextual meaning through a study of a news article.

This procedure involves the induction of framing theory in evaluating the commenter's frame of thought and individual entitled opinions. The second procedure involved the "rules of analysis", in which the comments were analy-

sed step by step using the rules of quantitative content analysis and reducing the material into content analytical units. This process took considerable time of finding themes portrayed out in the readers' comments. The third step is based on categorization. Categorization means assemblage of material in categories that seeks to answer research questions (Mayring 2000). Specifically for this paper, allocation of material into categories was accurate; every comment was allocated correctly with the aid of NVIVO 11.

Qualitative content analysis was used in this paper because it enabled the authors to extract readers' comments online in order for them to determine if online readers engage in serious discourse that adds value to the economic and socio-political views of online participants in online political commentary during the 2014 South African general elections

## RESULTS

### **Analysis of Participants' Comments on Economic Meltdown, Anti-Corruption, Dishonest, Desperation and Transparency**

Participants noted that, the South African economy is at a decline and citizens have attributed this to many things. Some of them were of the notion that, the ANC has failed to govern the country resulting in the rand losing value when compared to the dollar and other powerful currencies. Others attributed the economic decline to the policy proposals to nationalise state resources such as land, mines and banks. Participants went as far as comparing South Africa with Zimbabwe and Venezuela and suggest that the reason for experiencing the economic meltdown is because of corruption by top government officials. Some of the participants cited the Nkandla debacle as the main culprit while others blamed it on poor economic policies. Participants ended up anticipating a situation where, the price of milk and petrol will be at par. The concept 'economic meltdown' was discussed by 19 participants and this is what one of them had to say:

*"They do not fear the fat slug... just his policies which they know will destroy the economy of the country as surely as they did Zimbabwe and Venezuela which is where the weak minded EFF got their idea from... Look up Ven-*

*ezuela and see what damage has been done recently as a result of these populist policies... and Zimbabwe we all know about."*

Corruption as noted by participants has been making headlines in the South African media with almost all spheres of influence being accused of corruption. They went on to point out that the ANC leadership have been accused of corruption. Some of the participants who participated in online discussions during the 2014 South African general election proved to be anti-corruption. Some participants who stated that they were against corrupt leaders within the ANC said they are voting the party mainly because of Mandela. Some did not even want to be associated with the leadership of Jacob Zuma stating that he does not represent the principles of the ANC. The concept 'anti-corruption' was identified in conversations of 29 participants. One of the participants contributed to the debate by stating that:

*"Of course the government cannot satisfy everyone, that should be a given. What it should do is stop the thieving. A minister clocking up R12million in air transport should be accountable; a president not knowing R246million are spent on his private residence should be impeached. R30billion maladministered in one year....not enough space and memory to list all. I really think MP's should have higher education and perhaps the grade of Bs will be better."*

Participants noted that, in the run to the 2014 general elections the ANC has been accused of desperation. They were seen as using tricks such as promising the poor of increasing grants if they vote for the party. Participants noted the desperate measures by the ANC to lure citizens to vote for them. The concept 'desperation' was discussed by 3 online participants with one of them noting that:

*"The ANC relies on the social grants that are given to the poor. Of the 62 percent of their voter base how many actually pay tax? Probably less than 10 percent and the other 52 percent are sheep that will follow blindly baa baabaa."*

In this analysis participants noted that, there are some politicians who lure voters to vote for their party promising them good service delivery while they have their own hidden agendas. Participants pointed among other issues that:

*"What is their real agenda? There is always a bond between the dishonest."*



The concept ‘dishonest’ was raised by 2 participants.

Participants in this analysis noted that, there have been rumours surrounding the 2014 South African general election. Participants raised their concern on the issue of transparency concerning the way ballot papers have been transported to different voting stations and how they have been disposed of. The concept ‘transparency’ was raised by 3 participants. Thus they mentioned that:

*“You would think that once counted they would be put neatly stacked in number order bound into bundles and stored in sealed boxes, marked with the same labels on the ballot boxes and then transported to a single point where they are signed for and the boxes stored in an orderly fashion on shelves, until such time they are no longer required and then properly destroyed.”*

In this analysis the researchers once again noted that, participants took turn to reflect play in their discussions. Thus, some of the participants took time off the serious debate and passed social comments. One of the participants’ whose comment reflected social comment said:

*“Who gives a hoot?”*

The other participant said:

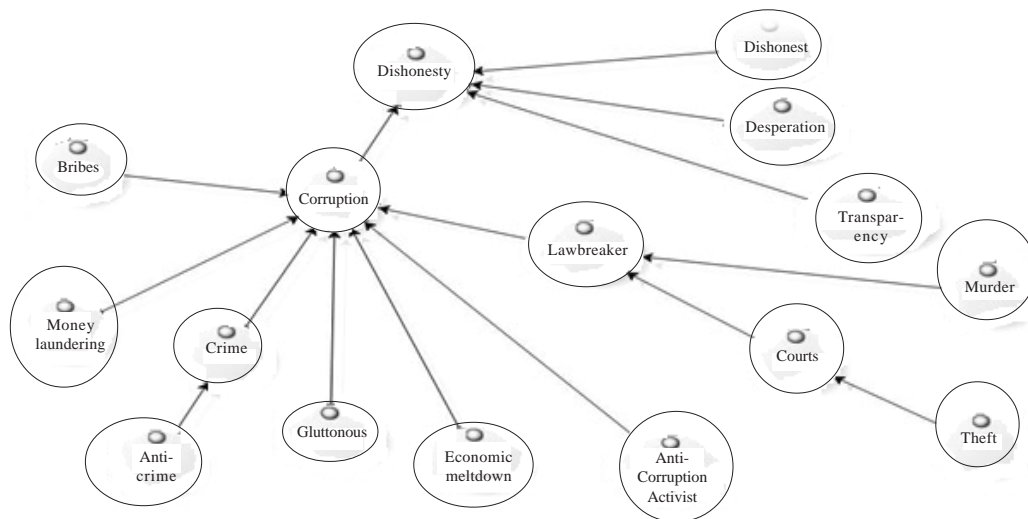
*“Thanks for the clarity. Regarding the Viagra, oops, I meant QWERTY keyboard:*

*So, I dropped my tablet mobile device, and the QWERTY is now the MERDE Keyboard; so every time I try to type Erections it comes out as Elections.”*

All the concepts discussed by online participants as depicted in Figure 1 were extracted online and coded using the NVIVO 11 software. The findings discussed in this section are in line with the arguments of Fiske, (1989) who proposed the active audience theory which argues that, in the mass media environment, audience members can actively interpret all kinds of media content they consume rather than just passively receive what the mass media feed them.

**Analysis of Participants’ Comments on Corruption and Bribes**

Participants suggested that political corruption is deeply rooted in South Africa. Comparative experience does not indicate that the historical South African political environment was especially likely to nurture a venal bureaucracy as



**Fig. 1. Economic meltdown, anti-corruption, dishonest, desperation and transparency**  
 Source: Author

a fairly industrialized and extremely coercive state. To them the apartheid era may have been less susceptible to many of the forms of political corruption analysts over other post-colonial developing countries. Participants pointed out that, democratization has made government less secret, inhibiting corruption in certain domains but through extending government's activities opening up possibilities for abuse in others. They further noted that, today's authorities argue that the present extent of corruption is largely inherited and indeed certain government departments, notably those concerned with security and the homelands, as well as the autonomous homeland administrations themselves, had a history of routine official misbehaviour.

In this analysis, some participants blamed the ANC and they went as far as labelling it a thief. Corruption within the top government prompted the office of the public protector to investigate them. There are some of the well discussed corruption cases online such as the Gupta gate scandal, Nkandla, e-toll scandal, the corrupt relationship between Zuma, Shaik and Maharaj. Some even go as far as discussing the alleged corruption within the union leaders such as the AMCU boss corruption allegations. The concept 'corruption' was raised by 78 participants. One of the concerned participants mentioned that:

*"There was absolutely no reason for money to have been transferred into Masualle's account in the 1<sup>st</sup> place....red flag, corruption spotted no doubt there will be further release of factual evidence of fraud, theft and corruption....watch that space."*

Corruption according to participants has many faces and may be motivated by offering of bribe. Hence, political parties have been accused of offering bribes to lure people to vote for them. The ANC has been accused of offering food parcels and promising an increase in social grant in return for votes. The DA has also been accused of bribing the voters in a number of provinces. The concept 'bribes' was seen in conversations of 5 participants with one participant stating that:

*"Handing out R1000 at a time ... (and pretending he'll fight bribery and corruption)."*

### **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) cooperate 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 create. 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 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 percent. 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 researchers 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 problem. 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.

### **Analysis of Participants' Comments on Poor Journalism and Media Censorship**

Online participants were not happy with the way some of the websites were censoring their comments. They were complaining of either being blocked or that their comments are being deleted. To them, the most irritating factor was that those comments that were deleted were based on facts and rich in information. Some even went as far as mentioning that there is need to launch complaints with ICASA for these illegal activities. In the researchers' understanding it is against the constitution to censor media in case where the content is not abusive, sexist, incites violence or spreads propaganda. The concept of 'media censorship' was raised by 17 participants. One participant had this comment to share:

*"News24 working overtime again tonight deleting comments, why do we even bother commenting?"*

Though censored some participants pointed out that, South African citizens were once more concerned with the quality of news that they consume. Some of the articles they came across do not meet the standards and therefore do not deserve to be broadcasted. It appeared to them as if news editors were not proof reading their work before publishing. Some online participants had to dig deeper to previous reports of poor journalism which goes a long way in showing that, the quality of journalism in South Africa is shocking. Participants argued that newspapers and even national television station like the SABC seem to be getting their facts all wrong. They even pointed out that, the president of the ANC was at one point wrongfully branded as a druggie. Some went as far as showing how the SABC was taken to task once more for portraying Mr Kgalema Motlanthe (the alleged president of South Africa) as being more presidential than Jacob Zuma.

Other participants revealed that, the SABC was also firmly rapped on the knuckles for constantly showing Mr Zuma's supporters toyi-toyi'ing outside the Pietermaritzburg court house. In one of the spate of bad journalism, President Motlanthe was accused of trashing a house and effectively trying to pay off NPA head Vusi Pikoli to leave before firing him. Mr Mot-

lanthe went on to dismiss the case and had to brand it as all lies and that the journalists obviously got their information from some dodgy sources. During the 2014 national election campaigns some media houses were once more accused of poor journalism and were in an ANC destruction path. They were accused of reporting wrong facts about the NUMSA boss Mathunjwa and wanted to destroy his career based on lies. The concept of 'poor journalism' was raised by 36 participants. One frustrated participant had this to say about poor journalism:

*"This journalist was either drunk or one of those who do not have journalist qualifications for sure, seemingly didn't see what other sober journos saw Zuma mesmerized us with his charm and speech, only hard-core ANC will understand But won't blame the poor journalist, is just a zombie."*

### **Analysis of Participants' Comments on African Political Affairs**

Africa according to participants just like any other continent has her own problems though not unique but requires the attention of her inhabitants. The researchers is of the opinion that Africa can solve her own problems if let alone to deal with them without interference from the first world countries. This view was also shared by the online participants as they were discussing 2014 national elections, the concept African solution to African problems was discussed by 8 participants. One participant had this to say on this matter:

*"That's European culture; let us deal with this the African way."*

Participants further stated that, the African continent is marked with political controversy. They pointed out that, there is no state in Africa that stands out to blame another from political affairs to socio-economic issues we seem to be sailing in the same boat. This means that if there are any problems in Africa, we must seat down as African countries and find a solution to our problems rather than looking to other continents for help. All the discussions affecting Africa must be found in Africa and must be held in Africa. One cannot dispute that part of the African problems are man made by the same countries that will offer to help although some are



genuine well-wishers just like when African was fighting colonialism.

Online participants took time to reflect on the African political affairs to see if South Africa and her different political parties stand out when it comes to political practises. However some of the online participants were of the view that other African countries like Somalia, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Kenya, Ethiopia to name just a few are taking advantage of South Africa because of her good national, international and economic policies. This to them, is costing the citizens who pay tax and in return benefiting mainly one political party the ANC of which to some is unacceptable. The concept of 'African political affairs' was discussed by 22 online participants. One participant went on to say:

*"You have to admit that we are also paying the price for the mismanagement of Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Somalia, Nigeria, Ethiopia...to name a few. There is no doubt that the general consensus is that taxpayers are willing to build, we all benefit, but really, to then be scr@wed in the way the ruling party does, is too much. The villains here are not the taxpayers, it is the ANC."*

## DISCUSSION

### Economic Crisis

The economic meltdown in South Africa has caused many people to lose faith in the ANC led government with other white citizens contemplating leaving the country. This study also found out that, many readers indicated that corruption and poor policies are the main contributors to the economic meltdown. The economic situation is worsened by the crisis such as unemployment rate which is reported to be at 25.5 percent and the highest levels of inflation which led to the weakening of the rand when compared to other currencies such as the dollar, euro and pula. The economic crisis also worsens to the extent that the government is struggling to support famers with 7 out of 9 provinces suffering from drought and declared disaster areas, electricity load shedding, unclean water and deteriorating medical facilities. This paper also revealed that, readers blame the political domination by the ANC as the main factor behind corruption that has led to the South African eco-

nomical meltdown. However the ANC blames the economic meltdown to the apartheid regime policies which catered only for the few, the adoption of nuclear program by the ANC, poor investment policies and the threat for indigenization of foreign companies by the EFF. The ANC supporters and their leadership put all the blame to the former National Party and its apartheid regime policies which were anti-blacks and are still affecting many black citizens to date.

### Corruption

It was evident in this paper that, the government and political leaders are criticized for abusing power and engaging in corrupt activities. Readers are suspicious of a government that kills, runs elections that are not free and fair and violently intimidates its citizens in order to keep itself in power. Public opinion suggests that political corruption is deeply rooted in South Africa. Readers online argue that, comparative experience between the democratic and apartheid government does not indicate that the historical South African political environment was especially likely to nurture a venal bureaucracy as a fairly industrialized and extremely coercive state which suggest that, the apartheid order may have been less susceptible to many of the forms of political corruption analysts have associated with other post-colonial developing countries. Democratization of South Africa has made government less secret, inhibiting corruption in certain domains though extending government's activities and opening up possibilities for abuse in others.

It was also evident that, today's authorities argue that the present extent of corruption is largely inherited resulting in government departments and administrators revealing their corrupt deeds. Some online participants put the blame on the ANC going as far as labelling it a thief. Corruption within the top government officials prompted the office of the public protector to investigate them. There are some of the well discussed corruption cases online such as the Gupta gate scandal, Nkandla, e-toll scandal, the corrupt relationship between Zuma, Shaik and Maharaj. Some even go as far as discussing the alleged corruption within the union leaders such as the AMCU boss corruption allegations. Read-

ers online argue that ANC political elites are corrupt as they loot national assets to enrich themselves. The majority of South African citizens are portrayed as languishing in poverty while political elites earn a better living from exploiting natural resources more especially with an unemployment rate as high as 25.5 percent though contested.

### **Cadre Deployment**

It was evident in this paper that, the issue of cadre deployment is a concern that affects almost all political parties across the world. In South Africa, deployment of ANC cadres in strategic positions played an important role in the ANC's taking control of the post-liberation state. It can be noted that South Africa's post 1994 constitutional democracy, the ANC dominated tripartite alliance has consistently utilized the practice of cadre deployment in public administration. At present the ANC, the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) co-operate closely, albeit somewhat fractiously, at all levels of government. 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 the researchers' view, cadre deployment can work, provided competent cadres are chosen with due regard for the conflict of interest this might create.

It was also revealed in this paper that, popular trust and loyalty are key phenomena that give the ANC and government the sustainability of cadre deployment processes. Interestingly, the ANC is unapologetic about the implementation of this policy amidst criticisms from the opposition parties and some of the organisation's disgruntled members. In fairness, there was a time when transforming institutions at local and national level was a monumental task, which had to be accelerated to give visible effect to the democratization of South African society. The ANC felt, in many cases justifiably, that intervention through cadre deployment would be acting against any possible sabotage by the opposition parties. The best way to neutralize this threat was to install loyal party members who could, at least, be trusted politically.

However, it was unfortunate that some members compromised the legitimacy of the cadre deployment policy as envisaged by the ANC. During the 2014 national elections online participants had to discuss the concept cadre deployment mainly looking at the ANC.

### **Poor Journalism**

The findings of this paper revealed that, South African citizens were once more concerned with the quality of news that they consume. Some of the articles they came across do not meet the standards and therefore do not deserve to be broadcasted. It appeared to them as if news editors were not proof reading their work before publishing. Some online commenters had to dig deeper to previous reports of poor journalism which goes a long way in showing that, the quality of journalism in South Africa is shocking. Newspapers and even national television station, the SABC, seem to be getting their facts all wrong. At one point the president of the ANC was wrongfully branded as a druggie. The SABC was taken to task once more for portraying Mr Kgalema Motlanthe (the alleged president of South Africa) as being more presidential than Jacob Zuma.

It was also evident that, the SABC was also firmly rapped on the knuckles for constantly showing Mr Zuma toyi-toyi'ing outside the Pietermaritzburg court house. In one of the spate of bad journalism, President Motlanthe was accused of trashing a house and effectively trying to pay off NPA head Vusi Pikoli to leave before firing him. Mr Motlanthe went on to dismiss the case and had to brand it as all lies and that the journalists obviously got their information from some dodgy sources. During the 2014 national election campaigns some media houses were once more accused of poor journalism and were in an ANC destruction path. They were accused of reporting wrong facts about the NUMSA boss Mathunjwa and wanted to destroy his career based on lies.

### **African Political Affairs**

The findings of this paper validated that, the African continent is marked with political controversy and there is no state in Africa that stands

out to blame another from political affairs to socio-economic issues we seem to be sailing in the same boat. This means that if there are any problems in Africa, we must seat down as African countries and find a solution to our problems rather than looking to other continents for help. All the discussions affecting Africa must be found in Africa and must be held in Africa. One cannot dispute that part of the African problems are man made by the same countries that will offer to help although some are genuine well-wishers just like when African was fighting colonialism.

The findings of this paper are found to be in line with those of and support the studies of Schuth et al. (2007), Domingo (2010), Caldwell (2013) and Henrich and Holmes (2013), who found out that, the audience act as news agents, and that they generate news for themselves.

### CONCLUSION

The authors found out that, readers are enthusiastic to comment on political, socio-economic matters that affect their daily lives. The themes solicited from the online discussions ranges from, economic crisis, cadre deployment, corruption, poor journalism, and slate politics African political affairs and among other issues. It is the understanding of the authors that, out of the 13 political parties that participated in elections and are represented in parliament online readers are politically affiliated with either ANC, DA, EFF, COPE, UDM, PAC, NFP, IFP, FF+, Agang, APC, AIC or ACDP. It is noteworthy that, sometimes online discourse is determined by what the media reports about certain events in the South African political environment. The authors also realised that, online readers' perceptions on economic and socio-political issues are both constant and uneven although they differ from one story to another. One can note that South African citizens are not totally detached from politics let alone their political parties, hence biased comments towards their own parties or against other participants' parties.

The paper also established that, online commenters portray ANC as a corrupt organisation 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 democ-

racy 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 sentience of a despotic ANC led government that kills, runs disputed elections in order to keep themselves in control. During the conduct of this thesis, the researchers 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 researchers came up with and discussed above provide political and socio-economic issues that the online readers talk about.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The authors used network analysis to look at how readers constitute online discursive community as shaped by news articles on South African political issues specifically the 2014 general election. It is noteworthy that, network analysis can be used to study the corpus of readers' interaction on how they discuss, support, mimic, disparage each other's thoughts but at the same time iron out their political or personal differences. In these online forums there are those who act as opinion leaders for they always have new information on almost all issues. These were taken as the most influential and people who highly generated controversial and informative arguments. The discursive community is only a partial community that can be used as a mirror of the physical South African general populace. As noted by Habermas, it acts as a public sphere where community members voice out their concerns and be heard freely without curtailment or censorship. Those who participated in the 2014 South African general elections online forums discussed many issues ranging from political to socio-economic issues without hesitation, fear or favor. However, the concern with the online public sphere is that it may or may not reflect a true physical South African public sphere on

the ground but forms an alternative public sphere. Hence the authors recommends that researchers must conduct public debates in all the 9 provinces rather than relying on online data. This will enable researchers to come up with precise public views of the general populace.

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