

The Influence of Social Media on the Transparency and Accountability of the South African Public Sector

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Abstract

There is a growing debate on the potential role of social media in improving government transparency and accountability and, ultimately, policy-making. This article analyses the contribution of social media, specifically Twitter, in increasing government transparency and accountability in South Africa by transferring information between the government and the public. To achieve this aim, we conducted an in-depth analysis of Twitter content, focusing on a curated selection of randomly selected top hashtags that became prominent in the South African context. These hashtags represent notable trends such as #FeesMustFall, #ZumaMustFall, #NotInMyName, #AmINext, and the #ThaboBester saga. By examining the discourses surrounding these hashtags, we aimed to uncover insights into how social media interactions intersected with government actions and reactions. Our results indicate that these hashtags served as potent catalysts for public engagement, driving discussions that critiqued government decisions and compelled timely reactions from the government.

Keywords: government accountability, government transparency, public engagement, social media interactions, South Africa

1. Introduction

This article analysed the contribution of social media in promoting transparency and accountability in the South African public sphere, because the power of social media in contemporary society cannot be ignored. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp, among others, provide a space in which society can communicate “freely” and at relatively low cost, articulating often divergent views. For the purposes of this study, the focus is on Twitter, which serves as a forum for computer-mediated online conversations and is increasingly important in forming a new social order.

Twitter currently has 450 million active users each month. Facebook and Instagram both have billions of users, and outnumber Twitter in terms of their overall user base, but with 259.4 million daily active users, Twitter nevertheless maintains a strong engagement, guaranteeing a steady stream of people eager to read the most recent tweets and to comment on various topics (Social Shepherd, 2023). Until October 2018, user comments on Twitter, also known as tweets, were limited to 140 characters, but from November 2018, the maximum limit was increased to 280 characters. Users can comment and interact with tweets by retweeting, liking, and/or tagging other users, or by directly messaging the tweet’s author, because tweets are publicly accessible unless they are marked as private (Arigo, Pagoto, Carter-Harris, Lillie, & Nebeker, 2018). One key feature which distinguishes Twitter from Facebook is that Twitter offers users a measure of online communication anonymity, resulting in a diverse spectrum of usage patterns. There is a complex interplay between personality traits and engagement on both Twitter and Facebook (Hughes, Rowe, Batey & Lee, 2012).

In the last two decades, there has been an enormous increase in the number of online political groups and in online activism on the African continent, with citizens using social media to air their grievances, thus extending their participation in the social and political spheres (Eom, Hwang, & Kim, 2018). Fashoro and Barnard (2021, p.59) point out that “[c]itizens are demanding accountability and transparency from governments and are less passive in their interactions with governments.” Conversely, the rapid adoption of social media has enabled the public sector to use these media to interact with and encourage public participation in public affairs. This is a response to the growing number of citizens in recent years who demand that they be involved in matters of government (such as policy-making, policy implementation and policy evaluation) and that governments be more responsive to citizens’ changing needs and opinions (Mainka, Hartmann, Stock, & Peters, 2015).

Through social media, citizens can engage directly in dialogue with politicians, civic officials, and government agencies. In enabling such direct interaction, social media have proved to be helpful in crises where physical access might be difficult, but emergency communication is necessary. Moreover, social media use keeps the public engaged and, to some extent, happy. Another benefit in the public sector is that the use of social media by state institutions can cut costs dramatically. Social media help governments overcome resource limitations by providing a cost-efficient space for communication and collaboration (Silva, Tavares, Silva, & Lameiras, 2019). Thus, one can argue that, given the resource challenges faced by many African governments, including South Africa, social media is a game-changer. Finally, in the context of governance, the use of social media promotes trust between a country's government and its citizens, because it increases transparency and accountability (Bertot, Jaeger & Hansen, 2012a).

This study contributes to the growing field of Twitter-based research to understand the use of the platform in South Africa. It offers a comprehensive analysis of the complex interplay between social media, government responsiveness, and citizen engagement in this country. Its contributions extend across the academic, policy, and practical domains, fostering a deeper understanding of the evolving dynamics between technology, governance, and society.

The remainder of this article presents a review of the literature on concepts of transparency and accountability, details on the methodology that guided this study, a discussion of the findings, and the conclusions.

2. Literature Review

This section reviews key literature on transparency, accountability and social media. We include literature on the conceptualisation of transparency and accountability in the governance arena, review the literature on social media, and consider the literature on the links between social media and the transparency and accountability of government.

2.1 Understanding Transparency and Accountability in the Government Context

Transparency is generally seen as a central element of accountability and good governance. However, as with many other concepts, there is no single, universally agreed-upon definition of transparency, only general consent that it relates to public access to information. In the broadest sense, “[t]ransparency involves clear and public disclosure of information, rules, plans, processes and actions by governments, companies, organisations and individuals” (Transparency International, 2011, p.4). Transparency is therefore a cornerstone democratic principle, revered by both scholars and practitioners in public administration. It forms the bedrock of reliable, efficient, and responsible government, as authors such as Hood (2006) and Kjaer (2004) have emphasised. Some aspects of transparency are citizens’ right to access information held internally; the scope, accuracy, and timeliness of this information; and what citizens can do if “insiders” fail to comply with the requirement for transparency. According to Song and Lee (2016, p. 423), “a good working definition of transparency can be extended to include completeness and understandability of information, that starts with the availability of information about an actor that allows the other actors to monitor the workings or performance of the first actor.” Governments can only promote transparency by showing the public all the dealings of the government and allowing the public to access, monitor and evaluate these activities. From the citizens’ perspective, transparency is attained when they are aware of what the government is doing, and information is readily available to them. According to Bertot, Jaeger and Grimes (2010), transparency and the right to access government information are now internationally regarded as essential to preventing corruption, allowing informed decision-making, promoting the accuracy of government information, and providing such information to the public, among other essential functions in society. Kierkegaard (2009) observes that transparency ultimately serves to keep a government honest.

In order to be transparent, information must flow in a timely and trustworthy manner, and must be accessible and intelligible to external stakeholders (Hollyer, Rosendorff, & Vreeland, 2011; Lindstedt & Naurin, 2010). Among policy-makers and academics alike, transparency is valued as a catalyst for fostering “good governance” (Hood, 2006). An added benefit is that it can potentially enhance performance standards and curb corrupt practices, as Meijer (2009) underscores. According to Grimmelikhuijsen and Welsh (2012), transparency encompasses a range of essential elements, namely inward observability, active disclosure, and external assessability. Inward observability pertains to external parties’ capacity to oversee internal organisational actions and choices. Active disclosure focuses on the organisation’s willingness to share details about its endeavours and their results. External assessability denotes the organisation’s readiness to subject itself to scrutiny and criticism from external entities. Consequently, transparency can be described as an organisation’s provision of information, allowing external stakeholders to monitor and appraise its internal operations and achievements.

In the South African context, the concept is not new. The government has prioritised being transparent and accessible to the public, as stipulated in chapter 10 of the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act, 108 of 1996* (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1996). In the last few years, the government has been making considerable progress in this direction. For example, the government has increased the amount of information it releases on its official website, www.gov.za. Moreover, the government of South Africa has taken an active role in the use of social media: most government departments have social media platforms. #The Presidency of the Republic of South Africa’s official Twitter account is among the most popular social

media platforms in the country, with 2.1 million followers for the Presidency. These platforms have become major avenues for the public to interact with their government as these platforms provide the latest information on issues unfolding in the country, including the official budget, legislation and important announcements.

According to Zuniga, Jenkins and Jackson (2018), it is widely assumed that the existence of transparency should result in better governance and greater accountability. Hood (2010) defines accountability broadly as the duty of an individual or organisation to answer in some way for how they have conducted their affairs. By contrast, Lubinga (2014, p. 88?) argues that accountability should be defined as a relationship of power, where the less influential “citizen” has “the right to ask a person with authority or ‘bureaucrat’ to explain his/her actions and can impose penalties for poor performance”.

For Speijcken (2012, p. 8), accountability refers to the complex contextual social process that occurs between citizens and the state that necessitates questions on public financial expenditure; on how issues make it to the agenda, and how they are beneficial to the broader public interest in a resource-efficient, effective and fair manner; and how the government acts and executes its public roles within the law, in a fair, non-corrupt and legitimate manner. For Joshi (2010, p. 2), accountability refers to attempts by governments to make information or processes that were previously opaque in the public domain accessible for use by citizen groups, providers or even policy-makers. There are two types of such accountability: vertical and horizontal. According to Breuer and Leininger (2021), vertical accountability follows the line of authority in the government where each official is accountable to his/her superior, and at the end of the line all are accountable to the public. Horizontal accountability occurs between networks of control outside the government.

According to Bovens (2007), accountability is based on the idea of power transmission and delegation, and always consists of at least three stages or elements: first, the office holder is required to inform the public about his/her conduct (this is the information phase); then the public can question the adequacy of the information or the legitimacy of the conduct (this is the debating phase); and finally, the public may pass judgment on the conduct of the office holder (this is the consequences phase). According to Thakuri (2020, n.d.), accountability refers to the “implicit or explicit expectation that one may be called on to justify one’s beliefs and actions to others, and the extent to which a person’s behaviours are observed and evaluated by others, with important rewards and punishments contingent upon those evaluations”.

Just as with transparency, the drafters of the South African *Constitution* recognised how fundamental accountability is to democracy. Therefore, they expressly included it in the founding provisions (RSA, 1996). The government of South Africa has also taken several steps over the past decade to increase both the transparency and the accountability of its government. The *Public Finance Management Act 1* (RSA 1999), requires the government to publish its budget and financial statements online. In addition, in terms of the *Constitution*, the country’s Auditor General has the authority to audit the government’s financial statements and investigate the government’s spending and security expenditure, among other state institutions supporting constitutional democracy (RSA, 1996).

Despite the legislature’s attempts to ensure transparency and accountability, South Africa lags behind in respect of accountability compared to peers, such as the United States and the United Kingdom. While there has been notable progress regarding accountability in recent years, much still needs to be done before South Africa can claim to meet the criteria for best practices. According to Thakuri (2020), on the accountability front, South Africa can be said to be going through an accountability crisis. Taking only the period from the first fully democratic elections in 1994, South Africa has been faced with various accountability issues: the Mbeki-era AIDS denialism; the arms deal scandal in 1999; the decimation and looting of state-owned enterprises; ongoing gross violations of procurement policies as witnessed in several tender scandals; the capture of state resources to enrich private interests (the Gupta case); corruption in the Health Ministry during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the failure to meet basic socio-economic rights, giving rise to service delivery protests, such as the 2021 July riots, obstructing millions from living a life commensurate with their right to basic human dignity.

From the definitions above, it can be deduced that accountability and transparency are interrelated concepts that complement each other. Without transparency, there can be no accountability, and vice versa. Transparency and accountability are both critical for the efficient functioning of a modern economy and for fostering social well-being. In most societies, many powers are delegated to public authorities. Some assurance must then be provided to the delegators—that is, society at large—that this transfer of power is not only effective, but is not being abused. Transparency ensures that information can be used to measure the authorities’ performance and guard against any possible misuse of powers. In that sense, transparency serves to achieve accountability, which means that authorities can be held responsible for their actions. Without transparency and accountability, trust between a government and those whom it governs is lacking. The result would be social instability and an environment that is less than conducive to economic growth (Carstens, 2005).

2.2 Contextualising Social Media

Stamati, Papadopoulos and Anagnostopoulos (2018) claim that social media use enhances citizen participation and engagement in decision-making and policy development, facilitate openness and transparency efforts, and reduce corruption. Ceron (2017) argues that social media is an uncoerced public sphere that facilitates interaction and dialogue

between citizens and political elites, a process which promotes transparency and accountability. Thus, social media refer to platforms for interactions among people during which they produce, share, and/or exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks (Maryville University, 2022). Social media are made up of many totally different platforms. Each platform is used for specific functions, for instance, expressive ability is most typical on TikTok or Instagram, or people try to promote their career via LinkedIn. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Tiktok are referred to as “networking” platforms because they permit users to interact with each other in a variety of ways. All in all, these platforms facilitate interactive one-to-few or many-to-many communication on an international scale (Reisach, 2020, p. 907).

Just a decade old, the use of social media has grown exponentially in recent years. It is used for a variety of purposes, from keeping in touch with friends and family to sharing news and opinions. Social media have also become a major avenue for companies to communicate with their customers. They provide a platform for businesses to build a brand and expand their customer base. In the world, to date, there are 4.48 billion people actively using social media, which represents an increase of 13.13% year-on-year, from 3.69 billion in 2020 (Dean, 2021). Facebook is the leading social network, with 2.85 billion of 4.48 billion social media users worldwide. YouTube and WhatsApp follow with over 2 billion users, and Messenger, WeChat, and Instagram all have 1 billion or more users. Globally, of these users, on average, individuals spend 2 hours 25 minutes (145 minutes) per day on social media (Dean, 2021).

Keeping pace with these trends, social networking websites such as Twitter rank among the most visited websites in most African countries (Statcounter 2022a). The South African media statistics are in line with this observation. It is estimated that over 50% of South Africans use social media. Of these, Facebook is used the most, with 65.5% usage, compared to 15.5% on Pinterest, 10.01% on Twitter and 5.8% on Instagram (Statcounter 2022b). South Africans spend on average of four hours per day on social media. This high usage shows the power of social media as a platform for interaction and communication.

This phenomenal growth can be explained in part, according to Essoungou (2010), by the fact that, along with regular citizens, African stars, thinkers, political leaders and governments have rapidly joined the global conversation in the use of social media. Governments have increased the amount of information released on social media. The government of South Africa in particular has taken an active role in the use of social media. Government departments and the President’s official Twitter account are among the most popular social media platforms in the country. To demonstrate the uses and impacts of social media, it is important to highlight that by 2020, the Facebook fan base of Côte d’Ivoire’s football star and UN goodwill ambassador Didier Drogba was more than 12 million people strong (*Memeburn*, 2020). Nelson Mandela, the most loved politician, had 7.7 million followers, and *News24*, a South African news platform, had 7.3 million fans on Facebook (*Memeburn*, 2020).

In 2021, a report by Ornico (2021, p. 4) revealed that in South Africa, approximately 38.2 million people were online, and that the uptick in the use of social media platforms was enormous. The most popular social media platform was Facebook, with an estimated 27 million local users (87%) – 18 million of these users used only mobile phone devices. However, WhatsApp and the video platform YouTube were found to be the most used. According to Ornico (2021), an estimated 93% of internet users used these two platforms each month.

More South Africans now use social media to search for information on government programmes and services, providing the government with a chance to interact directly with the public and to improve its transparency and accountability. Even political parties now have social media pages with messages urging citizens to vote, undertaking to make better policies and to be transparent and accountable once in government. The African National Congress (ANC), Democratic Alliance (DA) and Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) are the most popular parties on Twitter, with over 1.9 million followers combined (Mzekandaba, 2019). By 2019, the EFF had 743 955 followers on Twitter and 476 778 on Facebook (Mzekandaba, 2019). The ANC had the most Facebook followers (540 440) and 652 035 on Twitter. These two parties had over one million combined followers on Twitter and Facebook. Social media help to keep people in touch with the work of various political parties and have a much broader and faster reach than other media forms. The work a party does and has been doing leading up to elections is communicated through social media to achieve wide coverage.

A glance at various public institutions’ social media subscriptions revealed that in 2023 the South African government’s Facebook page had 932 000 followers (Government of South Africa, 2023) The Presidency of the Republic of South Africa had 1 million Facebook followers and 2 194 773 Twitter followers, and it identifies its intention on the social media site as follows: “In the interests of good governance and transparency, we aim to provide you with as much up-to-date information.” (The Presidency of the Republic of South Africa, 2023). Among Departments, Home Affairs had 12400 Facebook followers and 154 780 Twitter followers (Department of Home Affairs 2023). Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department of Health’s Facebook and Twitter accounts surged to 2.1 million and 373 315 followers, respectively (National Department of Health South Africa, 2023).

Beyond government departments, in the public sector, municipalities also use social media to engage the public. For

example, Kaunda (2021) reported the following Facebook presence per metro: eThekweni Metropolitan Municipality—327 285; the City of Tshwane—231 321; the City of Johannesburg—176 047; Ekurhuleni—180 282; the City of Cape Town—269 300; Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality—16 071; Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality in Gqeberha—62 026, and the Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality—51 615. Analysis of these Facebook pages revealed that the municipalities share information daily on their pages for public consumption. Information updates focus on service delivery issues, economic recovery programmes, waste removal backlogs, COVID-19 updates and vaccination drives, oversight visits to certain communities by members of mayoral communities, warnings on illegal electricity connections, appeals to financially struggling residents to contact the city with debt repayment plans, calls for registration on city supplier databases, activities to keep the cities clean, invitations to virtual council meetings, tourism promotions, and advertising job vacancies. Residents respond immediately to these posts. Beyond complaints and complimentary comments, posts also alert the municipality about power and water outages in certain areas, uncollected refuse, streetlights that are not working, potholes, driving licence centres that are not operating optimally, the need to fix or upgrade signage on street corners, or request calls to be answered in municipal call centres, and ask how to send water and electricity meter readings. Such interactions meet key standards of service delivery that include openness and transparency as laid out in the Batho Pele principles. The visibility and presence of municipal officials on the Facebook pages are crucial, as the power of social media lies in its interactive nature. Therefore, social media platforms permit the government to communicate with the public regarding service delivery, offering platforms for information exchange.

Social media users form a network that provides a powerful means of sharing, organising, and finding content and contacts. In this regard, citizens with the capacity to undertake an independent analysis of issues, form opinions and influence others can leverage social media for policy engagement. For example, complaints to the administration can be made more easily by directing complaints to public institutions' Facebook accounts or by mentioning them on Twitter. For governance, in particular, information flow through smooth collaboration by information providers could help to overcome various institutional problems, such as graft. Citizens' and governments' use of social media platforms translates into their becoming bound to one another through exposure to a common class of problems and the pursuit of joint solutions, thereby embracing change.

2.3 Challenges in the Use of Social Media

South Africa has experienced periods of economic growth and social progress, and simultaneously, a surge in social media use. Today most South Africans have some access to a mobile phone, and seem to prefer Facebook as an internet platform. Over the last few years, social media platforms have been used to organize protests, raise awareness about government policies, and even find jobs. However, negative effects of social media use have also become evident, especially social media addiction and online bullying, as discussed below.

Social media are designed to offer dialogue (many-to-many interaction), allowing for large groups of geographically dispersed users to produce valuable information resources and solve challenging problems by tapping into unique and rare expertise through discussion (Bertot, Jaeger & Hansen 2012a, p. 32). However, few social media platforms consider the accessibility requirements for all individuals in society so that the information generated is representative of all. For example, Wentz and Lazar (2011) found that the “accessible” version of Facebook has fewer features and greatly reduced usability and functionality, limiting its usefulness for users with disabilities. Furthermore, although social media technologies can potentially reach a large percentage of the public, these technologies also exclude users without internet access, including economically disadvantaged persons, from receiving information. Many South Africans still lack access to electricity and the internet, and those who have access often cannot afford it.

Unlike traditional media, social media rely on user-generated content. This refers to any content created by end-users or the general public, rather than professionals. Problems with credibility, bias and information management arise. Information management issues refer to problems with privacy, security, accuracy, and archiving, spanning major challenges such as personally identifiable information, the security of government data and information, and the accuracy of publicly available data (Bertot, Jaeger & Hansen 2012b, p. 32). With regard to credibility, the fact-checking organisation Africa Check has pointed out that some video clips and pictures shared on social media to depict alleged South African protests are from other countries, and some have been photoshopped (Karombo, 2021).

Although South Africa is regarded as a technological powerhouse, with many people in the country using social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, the downside is several social media-related scandals, relating to the spread of false information, hatespeech, and online bullying. Although South Africa has taken significant steps to regulate social media, such as the passing of the *Electronic Communications and Privacy Bill* in 2017 (RSA, 2017), and the cyber protection legislation passed in 2020, which stipulates that it is an offence “to incite violence, or call people to be involved in the destruction of any property” on social media, the country is still at the mercy of these platforms. In 2021, after violent protests in June, the Minister of Police, Bheki Cele, threatened to use a cluster of security ministers to “monitor

all social media platforms and track those who were sharing false information and calling for civil disobedience” (Karombo, 2021). In 2022, South Africa again witnessed social media-instigated violence, such as the social media campaign under the banner of Operation Dudula, which saw Zimbabwean Elvis Nyathi (43), a gardener and father of four, killed in Diepsloot by a mob going door to door demanding to see visas (Ho, 2022).

Social media also tends to create hype on issues, resulting in reactionary but not always lasting solutions. For example, 2019 saw several high-profile deaths as a result of gender-based violence, and young women from across the country gathered to tell the Presidency that enough was enough. They took to social media to tell their own stories related to gender-based violence, using the hashtag #AmINext to bring awareness to the crisis. Later that year, they made international headlines by marching to protest in front of Parliament, calling for an end to GBV and femicide. President Ramaphosa responded swiftly to these protests by putting in place a budget and a formal committee to handle the crisis, but 2020 saw South Africans’ anger rise again after a young woman, Tsegafatso Pule, who was eight months pregnant, was murdered by her boyfriend. A serious challenge facing South Africa today thus remains how to use social media better. The country is technologically advanced, but South Africans struggle to harness the power of social media to bring people together, solve problems, and learn new things.

Social media also pose some risk in terms of privacy and increased government scrutiny. Unlike searchable phone numbers, emails, or names, one’s social media account is indexed by the world at large: anyone can find you. Additionally, there is a fear that social media platforms may be used to punish political speech, which could set a dangerous precedent, as well as increase the risk of self-censorship. This is a particular concern around social media in China and African countries such as Uganda, where the use of platforms discussing sensitive topics is regulated by the government. For example, WeChat and QQ in China and Facebook in Uganda are highly policed. In 2019, the government of China used its social media platforms to “cleanse” WeChat of content that was deemed “anti-state” by making the platform inaccessible to certain users. This shut down a platform that over half of the Chinese population used to engage in private conversations, and severely threatened freedom of expression.

One fact remains: the prevalence of social media in our lives has radically changed how we relate to one another and the world around us. While the impact of social media on our privacy, diet and behaviour is still not entirely clear, social media have undoubtedly changed how we socialize and communicate with one another, including the ways governments and citizens interact.

2.4 The Link Between Social Media, Transparency and Accountability

According to the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), transparency exposes weaknesses in accountability. This implies that lack of transparency makes it difficult for the electorate to judge government spending and to exercise oversight, which is important ensuring in-service delivery (IDEA, 2013). Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have been instrumental in exposing corruption and addressing people’s grievances.

Social media provide avenues to voice opinions, exposing inefficiencies in the government. This leads to increased pressure to ensure accountability in the public sector, which has in turn improved the government’s service delivery. This is most evident in the public sector, where social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have been used to raise concerns about government spending and efficiency. This simplifies the process of reporting concerns to the official online accounts of institutions such as the public protector, international administrative tribunals, and non-governmental organisations, which could use information supplied by the public to hold politicians accountable for their actions.

Social media have also been shown to increase the accountability of government officials by providing real-time information to the public, and enabling the public to share views and opinions on social media platforms. This has also enhanced government transparency, leading to better government services, decisions and policies (IDEA 2013). As Song and Lee (2016, p.437) point out, people only trust the government when they know what the government does. Social media allow information to be easily published and the rapidly spread, creating a transparent atmosphere that can strengthen citizens’ goodwill towards the government. For instance, during the general election on 8 May 2019, social media helped the electorate to ascertain what their politicians intended to do if they were elected to power—parties published their manifestos and publicly debated the issues. This kind of open disclosure of information ensures open accountability and transparency (Jimada, 2019, p.8).

The link between social media use, transparency and accountability can also be seen in the increased government responsiveness, especially in South Africa. Once a grievance is made public, public outrage and increased public monitoring force the authorities to address the grievance (OECD, 2011, p.4). A case in point was the campaign to oppose increased university fees and calling for free tertiary education, using the hashtag #FeesMustFall. The campaign went so viral. According to Bosch (2019:75), this represents a form of hashtag activism in its facilitation of the formation of ad hoc public issues. As a result of the viral diffusion of the campaign, it achieved some success in 2015: the Minister of Education announced that there would be no fee increases for the year. Similarly, as already mentioned, in 2019, young

women protested high-profile deaths due to gender-based violence, using the hashtag #AmINext to bring awareness to the crisis. Further protests at Parliament resulted in Presidential action.

As Jimada (2019, p.2) point out, internet technology has also provided an atmosphere conducive to contemporary transnational political activism. Its characteristic speed and space have facilitated international communication among nongovernmental organisations, allowing protesters to take local events to an international level with minimal resources and bureaucracy, to bring about social change. One example is the dispersion of the term “state capture,” which gained traction during the Zuma years (2009-2018), but resonated worldwide, giving regular citizens an insight into the behaviour of different state actors. The term could not have been disseminated as widely without social media.

Accountability can also be linked to transparency through three strong accountability relationships with the different actors in the service delivery chain, itemised by Hasnain (2008, p. 2). With the information obtained, the poor can hold policy-makers accountable; policymakers can hold service providers accountable, and intergovernmental frameworks connecting national and local policy-makers are irrefutable, making them instrumental in improving service delivery.

The links discussed above are based on the intuitive logic that secrecy breeds corruption and that sunlight is the best disinfectant (Hubbard, 2007, p. 3). Accountability, transparency and social media have a positive relationship, and all have an impact on one another. Where there is effective and efficient social media use, transparency is a given, and information is made available to the people, in turn promoting accountability. Acts of corruption through outright bribery, theft of public property or embezzlement, patronage, and the bestowing of favours to relatives and friends can be minimised. For example, the constant media coverage of corruption has led to investigations, trials, and resignations in South Africa. The Zondo Commission was established on state capture and the #ZumaMustFall protests in 2015 called for then President Zuma to resign, among others.

The next sections provide an overview of the method followed to examine the role of social media in enhancing accountability and transparency from a South African perspective, and the findings.

3. Method

The study reported in this article aimed to gain insight into the role of social media in enhancing government transparency and accountability. To achieve this aim, a qualitative approach was adopted. Qualitative research entails systematic data generation, analysis, and interpretation to address specific research inquiries. This approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of phenomena, unlike the quantitative method, which focuses on numerical data.

Data for this study were sourced from authoritative outlets, including journal articles and government publications, supplemented by content extracted from Twitter. The selection of Twitter content centred around top hashtags and a number of randomly selected hashtags that have gained prominence on the platform. Specifically, hashtags such as #FeesMustFall, #ZumaMustFall, #NotInMyName or #AmINext, and the #ThaboBester saga were examined to capture diverse perspectives and discussions.

The data collected were analysed through a hermeneutic process of interpretation, chosen to derive meaningful insights from the sources. The hermeneutic process, which is a method of understanding and interpretation, was applied to contextualise and decipher the information. This interpretive method encompasses both interpretation of the text itself (referred to as “textual hermeneutics”) and interpretation of the text by readers (referred to as “reader-response hermeneutics”) (George, 2020; Reisach, 2021:907). In this context, when we say that we understand, we mean that we have really got at something through an attempt at interpretation; but when we say that we do not understand, we mean that we got nowhere with our interpretation (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2020)

4. Results

It is important to note that prior studies have shown that social media play a critical role in influencing global political discourse (Conover et al. 2021). It informs citizens about their governments, which directly affects politicians’ behaviour. The findings relating to the aim of gaining insight into the role of social media in enhancing government transparency and accountability in South Africa are presented below. These results are based on in-depth analysis of Twitter content, focusing on the hashtags #FeesMustFall, #ZumaMustFall, #NotInMyName, #AmINext, and the #ThaboBester saga. Our examination of the discourses surrounding these hashtags uncovered insights into how social media interactions intersected with government actions and reactions.

4.1 #FeesMustFall

One of the most striking social media campaigns in South Africa was the #FeesMustFall campaign by higher education students in South Africa. Bosch (2019) argues that the intensity and efficacy with which this protest gained popularity may be attributed to social media engagement. According to Olagunju, Frankish and Wade (2022),

The revolutionary cry among young students for an end to corporate education was spiralled by the use of hashtags

from the #RhodesMustFall campaign, which began at the University of Cape Town and gradually shifted to the #FeesMustFall campaign experienced across South Africa. Almost all South African universities began to look for what must fall in their respective institutions with the creation of several sub-hashtags peculiar to each institution under the #FeesMustFall umbrella.

Social media thus created an avenue for the #FeesMustFall campaign to evolve from a local university protest to a national one. In response, President Zuma established a Commission of Inquiry into Higher Education and Training in January 2016, to investigate the feasibility of providing free tertiary education. Subsequently, in 2017, the government announced the provision of fee-free university and government-funded technical college education for undergraduate students coming from poor and working-class households in the following year, in other words, that free higher education would be provided to all new first-year students from families that earn less than ZAR350 000 per year (Muller, 2018).

4.2 #ZumaMustFall

Another hashtag that went viral was the #ZumaMustFall social media frenzy between 2015 and 2018 (Munusamy, 2016). An analysis of popular platforms, including Twitter, reveal scores of pages dedicated to #ZumaMustFall. Allegations against then President Zuma by the public included corruption, abuse of women, poor leadership, misuse of state resources, and general failure to uphold the *Constitution*. This prompted various public offices to take action against the President. In 2014, the highest court in South Africa ruled that President Jacob Zuma had violated the *Constitution* when he failed to repay government money spent on his private home. In addition, the Public Protector ruled that ZAR246 million (\$23m) had been irregularly spent on his rural home in Nkandla (Public Protector – South Africa, 2014, p. 4). Eventually, the ruling party, the ANC, recalled President Zuma, based on the argument that he had undermined or violated the *Constitution*, according to the country's Constitutional Court, which ordered President Zuma to pay back ZAR7.8-million (\$709 000) spent on non-essential upgrades at Nkandla (Verasamy, 2016; Whittles, 2016).

4.3 #NotInMyName or #AmINext

In 2019 thousands of South African women embarked on marches demonstrating against the failure of the government to deal with the rise in violence against women, following a chain of brutal attacks that shocked the nation. Lunga (2020) observes that one of the protests, organised by WomenProtestSA, was attended by local celebrities. People took to social media to express their anger and frustration about gender-based violence under the hashtags #NotInMyName, #AmINext, and #SAShutDown. Hashtags specific to violated women such as #JusticeForTshego (Tshegofatso Pule), #JusticeforNaledi (Naledi Phangindawo), and #JusticeforSanelisiwe (Sanele Mfaba) and many others have been mounted in response to alarming levels of femicide in South Africa.

In response, President Ramaphosa deployed ministers to meet with community leaders nationwide to understand what exactly was fuelling the increase in such crimes. In addition, special sexual offences courts that had operated intermittently over the years were reopened, and more resources were also directed towards places of safety for survivors of abuse, as well as government-funded programmes aimed at changing men's behaviour (BBC, 14 June 2020). In response to social media outcries regarding violence against women, the South African Government Facebook page reports that in 2020, the President held an interactive session with civil society formations to mark the #16DaysOfActivism for No Violence Against Women and Children campaign. The sessions were held virtually and were attended by the Inter-Ministerial Committee on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide #GBVF, representatives from the men's sector, survivors of gender-based violence, leaders of faith communities and civil society organisations. President Cyril Ramaphosa also signed into law legislation aimed at strengthening efforts to end gender-based violence, with a victim-centred focus on combating this dehumanising pandemic. The President assented to the *Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act Amendment Bill*; the *Criminal and Related Matters Amendment Bill*, and the *Domestic Violence Amendment Bill*.

4.4 Fuel Price Increase

Following a global surge in fuel prices in 2022, South Africans took to the Twitter pages of the South African government calling for government interventions to subsidise fuel. One South African Government follower using the name Jabulela-Jax Roberts stated:

Always ready for a photo opportunity SA Government!!!

We want details of exactly what you and each department are doing to assist this crisis and the country as a whole.

Don't give us pretty pictures—we want details and we want accountability and transparency. The glory days are over where you fly around spending money that you don't need to...having one meeting after the other.

See what Gift of the Givers do and follow their lead—they are not confused!!!!!"

In response to the social media frenzy concerning the escalating fuel prices, the government announced that the fuel levy

was suspended from April 2022, to bring some relief to households (RSA, 2022). However, the government made it clear that this suspension of the levy came at a significant cost to public finances, which affected other programmes of government. Thus, the suspension would not continue indefinitely.

4.5 The Thabo Bester Saga

Thabo Bester is a notorious “Facebook rapist” who was found guilty of both rape and murder, and who faked his own death in 2022 in order to escape from the Mangaung Correctional Center in South Africa. He evaded capture for about a year before being apprehended on April 8, 2023, in Arusha, Tanzania, with his companion, Dr. Nandipha Magudumana (Fihlani, 2023). The matter was brought to light by GroundUp, a private media company, and this matter was leaked to the media by Inspecting Correctional Services Judge Cameron because no action was forthcoming from the Minister (and there is no independent oversight of policing) (Khiba, 2023). After the media frenzy publicising the case, the government was forced to act. When the story broke on Twitter, it raised a plethora of questions surrounding loopholes in the criminal justice system and governance in South Africa. Several political parties and officials weighed in, for example:

IFP leader, Velenkosini Hlabisa says, ‘It’s a disgrace to have a government that is failing in every angle. Can it be law, can it be service delivery issues, can it be dealing with unemployment ...really.’ [...]

The Congress of the People (COPE) spokesperson, Dennis Bloem said, ‘We want to reiterate that Thabo Bester did not escape from that prison, he simply walked out of that prison with the assistance of corrupt prison officials.’ [...]

The African National Congress (ANC)’s first Deputy Secretary-General, Nomvula Mokonyane states that the debacle is an embarrassment. (Maphanga, 2023)

According to the president of the Police, Prisons and Civil Rights Union (POPCRU) Makhaza said the Department of Correctional Services (DCS) had failed, as had the Parliamentary Committee on Justice and Correctional Services which should have done its oversight work better. “They have been visiting this prison as a committee, they should have picked something up.”(Gilili, 2023)

In response to the public outcry on Twitter, the Minister of Home Affairs was forced to address the media in Pretoria, where he confessed that

they checked on their systems to establish the identity of the man who had assumed several identities, including the most famous one of Thabo Bester. Thabo Bester was never registered with home affairs at any stage, so the only place where you could find him was in correctional services, where he was an inmate. The minister also added that the only other place he was registered was at the Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital, where he was born. He said his department never paid much attention to the Bester and Magudumana saga until the news of their escape was publicised in social media. (Mashego, 2023; see also Dolley, 2023)

In a parliamentary briefing, Minister Motsoaledi also stated that

because Home Affairs had no record of Bester, they also did not have his fingerprints. Home Affairs had the largest database of fingerprints in the country and the only fingerprints they did not have were of those individuals who had only a birth certificate because they were too young to have IDs. He said the DHA was in the process of creating a Bill requiring people to get IDs at the age of 10. (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2023).

This admission by the Minister displayed transparency and accountability, but raised many questions over issuing passports, the possibility of corrupt officials assisting in illegal border crossings, issuing death certificates without an ID document, and why R1.4 million had been spent to retrieve two fugitives (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2023). This case also exposed glaring security failures at the prison. GroundUp reported that, according to the President of the Police, Prisons and Civil Rights Union (POPCRU), “Bester got preferential treatment compared to other inmates, some of our members told us that once he had a birthday party. He wore a suit and addressed those attending. They revealed that he had high profile visitors while inside” (Gilili, 2023). According to the *Mail and Guardian*, he was allegedly aided by several G4S employees, a number of whom have been arrested in connection with the escape plot (*Mail and Guardian*, 2023).

Based on the public response, with the increased media exposure on the case on April 14, 2023, the Minister of Justice and Correctional Services, Mr Ronald Lamola, apologised for not letting the public know that convicted rapist and murderer Thabo Bester was on the loose and accepted ownership in a statement. He was quoted as saying, “We take full responsibility that we did not let the public and victims know that this murderer was on the loose.” Furthermore, on May 2, 2023, the Department of Correctional Services terminated its contract with Bloemfontein Correctional Services, which is part-owned by G4S Global, based in London (*Mail and Guardian*, 2023; Ndenze, 2023).

5. Discussion

Based on the above examples, one can assert that a complex dynamic interplay exists between social media conversations and government responsiveness in the South African context. Our results indicate that these hashtags served as potent catalysts for public engagement, driving discussions that critiqued governmental decisions and compelled timely reactions from political actors. Furthermore, the study reveals that due to the use multiple media types, including online social media, information on these issues reached a vast number of citizens, creating awareness and giving them a voice to demand government action. These findings are in line with one of Linders's three typologies, namely the Citizen to Government typology (C-G), where the government holds the responsibility but citizens influence the direction of government by providing ideas (Linders, 2012). This also confirms the findings of Bertot et al. (2012b), who see social media as designed to act as a dialogue (many-to-many interaction), allowing for large groups of geographically dispersed users to produce valuable information resources and solve challenging problems by tapping into unique or rare expertise through discussion (Bertot et al. 2012b, p. 32).

The Thabo Bester case illustrates how heightened media exposure compelled the Minister of Justice and Correctional Services to acknowledge shortcomings publicly and to express regret for not promptly notifying the public about the fugitive rapist and murderer. It also exposing a pattern of engagement, suggesting a delicate dance between citizens' demands and official statements.

Furthermore, our study sheds light on the complex mechanisms through which social media platforms facilitate increased transparency. These hashtags allowed the country's citizens to become more informed by disseminating real-time information and fostering open debate, holding government entities accountable for their actions. For instance, the #ZumaMustFall and #NotInMyName campaigns highlighted allegations of misconduct, but also prompted officials to address these allegations with greater clarity and urgency. For example, the ANC was forced to react to public sentiment, amplified on social media, and eventually recalled President Zuma, citing his violation of the *Constitution*. The government's response to the #FeesMustFall movement materialized in the form of a promise to provide fee-free tertiary education for qualifying undergraduate students from disadvantaged backgrounds, demonstrating the direct influence of social media discourse on policy decisions.

In the face of widespread social media campaigns against gender-based violence, under President Cyril Ramaphosa's leadership, the South African government demonstrated a commitment to addressing these pressing issues. The interactive session held by the President with civil society formations during the #16DaysOfActivism for No Violence Against Women and Children campaign showcases social media platforms' potential to facilitate meaningful dialogues. The subsequent legislative actions, including the assent to bills aimed at amending criminal law relating to sexual offences and domestic violence underscore the government's willingness to translate social media activism into concrete policy steps.

6. Conclusion

Emanating from the above, there is no doubt that social media play a significant role in enabling information sharing and stimulating government transparency and accountability in the context of South Africa. Social media have facilitated unprecedented levels of public participation in the affairs of government. However, although social media have many positive attributes, prior research also reveals that it might also be used to heighten conflict, hatred, and xenophobia, among other things, and to spread "fake news" that may affect the success of government policies. The findings of this study illuminate the transformative potential of social media in stimulating citizen engagement and insisting on government accountability and transparency. The South African context offers a compelling example of how social media platforms can act as dynamic channels for participatory democracy, fostering meaningful dialogues and shaping impactful policy changes in response to citizen demands. These insights underscore the need for continued exploration of social media's evolving role in the realm of governance and its potential to drive positive societal change.

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