

South African Activists' Use of Nanomedia and Digital Media in Democratization Conflicts

TANJA BOSCH
HERMAN WASSERMAN
WALLACE CHUMA

University of Cape Town, South Africa

South African social activism reemerged in the 1990s after a brief lull following the end of apartheid and the transition to democracy. The revival of social activism appeared against the backdrop of a plethora of challenges facing the young democracy, including corruption, inequality, unemployment, and lack of service delivery. Protests have become a daily occurrence in South Africa as many of the poor people feel left out of the dividends democracy has brought. Although these protests are mediated in various ways—that is, activists use print and social media to broadcast their activities—many protests fail to attract mainstream media attention. This article explores how activists use nanomedia and digital media as communicative platforms in the context of an asymmetrical and tenuous relationship with mainstream media. The article draws on interviews with activists conducted during 2016 to explore their deployment of alternative communicative strategies in an environment where commercial mainstream media largely serves elite audiences and frames the discussion from the perspective of the civil society–democracy relationship.

Keywords: nanomedia, democratization conflicts, social activism, civil society, digital media

In the two decades since the end of apartheid, South Africa has become one of the most vibrant liberal democracies in Africa. However, despite the transition to formal democracy being heralded as peaceful, the postapartheid political environment has been characterized by ongoing community protests. The gains made in political and civil rights have not adequately extended to the arena of economic freedom for most of the country's citizens, making South Africa one of the most unequal societies in the world. In 2016, for example, the country's income Gini coefficient ranged between .66 and .70, with the top decile of the population accounting for 58% of the country's income and the bottom decile accounting for just 0.5%, according to the World Bank¹. Partly as a result of these post-apartheid realities, South

Tanja Bosch: tanja.bosch@uct.ac.za

Herman Wasserman: Herman.Wasserman@uct.ac.za

Wallace Chuma: Wallace.Chuma@uct.ac.za

Date submitted: 2016–10–04

¹ <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/southafrica/overview>

Copyright © 2018 (Tanja Bosch, Herman Wasserman, and Wallace Chuma). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <http://ijoc.org>.

Africa has, over the past 20 years, witnessed the proliferation of social movements fighting for a variety of issues related to the material well-being of its citizens. Protests have steadily increased since 2004 and are attributed to growing citizen frustration and tensions resulting from high levels of economic inequality. These issues include access to land, water, electricity, sanitation, and education, but the protests are also articulations of a much broader resistance against global and local hegemonic economic arrangements that have "spawned astounding disparities in wealth" (Chiumbu, 2015, p. 2).

The protests, defined as popular mobilization in support of a collective grievance, are often described as a "rebellion of the poor" (Alexander, 2010), because they have arisen in direct response to what has been perceived as macroeconomic policies that contribute to the growth of a poor urban underclass (Chiumbu, 2015, p. 2). Analyses of media coverage reveal that reporting draws on stereotypes of violence, anarchy, and chaos to delegitimize community struggles (Chiumbu, Reddy, Bohler-Muller, Gumede, & Mtshengu, 2016, p. 13). Often, reporting on these conflicts is reduced to traffic reports to warn of road closures or disruptions (Wasserman, Bosch, & Chuma, 2018).

This article explores how social movements in South Africa that are engaged in these "democratization conflicts" deploy alternative communicative strategies to mobilize and gain visibility in a context where access to the mainstream media is limited. In particular, the article explores the appropriation of a repertoire of methods, including the use of nanomedia (Pajnik & Downing, 2008), symbolic resources such as protest songs and dances, and the use of digital media to facilitate political activism and protest. These social movements exercise a "counterpower" (Castells, 2015, p. 9) to institutional power (which also includes the mainstream media), and they use a combination of media platforms to challenge the "institutional public space" occupied by the "dominant elites and their networks" (Castells, 2015, p. 10). For this reason, as Castells (2015, p. 10) points out, social movements must find a foothold in public life that extends beyond mainstream media and the Internet, and therefore must engage in alternative methods of creating spaces for communication and deliberation—for instance, by occupying spaces.

In South Africa, social movements combine traditional mobilization methods such as *toyitoying* (a militant march-dance), stay-aways, blockading of roads, and sit-ins with an engagement with media to convey their message (Chiumbu, 2015, p. 3). These movements also use various smaller and alternative media such as pamphlets, press statements, videos, and new media platforms to express their views and mobilize support (Chiumbu, 2015, p. 3). These alternative media platforms fall under the term *nanomedia*, as discussed in this article.

Nanomedia is a term created by John Downing and Mojca Pajnik to refer to a range of "nano"—or small-scale—communicative activities addressed to (and received by) different audiences. The approach in this article is to explore the deployment of nanomedia communicative strategies not as antidotes to mainstream media coverage but as independent of it—and, in some cases, arguably as a response to its perceived skewed coverage. We do not suggest a clear causal relationship between embracing nanomedia and lack of mainstream media coverage: For some social movements, this relationship may exist to an extent; for others, nanomedia and mainstream media are unrelated; and sometimes both are used simultaneously for enhanced visibility, especially during protest action.

The article draws on 25 in-depth interviews with representatives from a range of South African social movements, many of which simultaneously define themselves as civil society organizations, to explore their use of digital and nanomedia to mobilize support. We explored activists' activities around three key democratization conflicts, which are detailed further below. The nanomedia strategies are not viewed as merely supplanting the use of mainstream media—with which social movements generally have an asymmetrical dependency relationship—but as an additional strategy alongside continued attempts to engage mainstream media platforms.

Civil Society, Social Movements, and the Media

This research is based on key assumptions in the literature about the role of media, civil society, and social movements in democratization conflicts. These assumptions envisage a significant role for media and civil society in deepening democracy in transitional contexts. Civil society, seen as a dense network of civil associations, is said to promote the stability and effectiveness of the democratic polity through both the effects of association on citizens' "habits of the heart" and the ability of associations to mobilize citizens on behalf of public causes (Putnam, 2001). Civil society is often credited with resisting authoritarianism by creating voluntary associations that democratize society from below by pushing for change (Foley & Edwards, 1996). There has been a widespread assumption of the global relevance of civil society in strengthening development and democracy (e.g., Booth & Richard, 1998). Lewis (2001) suggests that civil society is also relevant in non-Western contexts, where local meanings "created around the concept of civil society . . . [have] become part of an increasingly universal negotiation between citizens, states and market around the world" (p. 11). A different strand of civil society thinking that has also been influential in some parts of the world in recent decades, influenced by Antonio Gramsci, argues that civil society is the arena, separate from state and market, in which ideological hegemony is contested, implying that civil society contains a wide range of organizations that both challenge and uphold the existing order (Lewis, 2001). However, "the values civil society actors promote are not always democratic" (Spasić, 2003, p. 450), and civil society structures do not automatically lead to democratic imaginaries. In some countries, "criminal organizations build their networks of support in the poor communities in exchange for patronage and forced protection" (Castells, 2008, p. 84), and civil society may also be violent or support repressive agendas (Glasius, 2010). This leads us to consider whether the emerging concept of "uncivil society" (Glasius, 2010) is useful in thinking about manifestations of civil society that challenge liberal democratic values as civil society becomes an arena for political conflict. The concept of uncivil society usually refers to organizations that use violence to achieve their ends, groups with nondemocratic goals, or right-wing groups. However, as Kopecky and Muddle (2003) point out, the distinction is problematic because "uncivil society" representatives can often be authentic representations of civil society.

A definitional concern when examining civil society organizations centers on delineating civil society groups in terms of whether they participate in social or political activism. There is a continuum between these forms of activism, and groups may act differently at different times. One would normally associate political activism with party politics, and civil society groups befitting the "political activist" tag would be those aligned to political parties or political causes, such as challenging the form of government or demanding human rights. In South Africa, many former activists were incorporated into the state in

1994, which resulted in a temporary demobilization of civil society immediately after the end of apartheid (Marais, 2011). If, as Castells (2015, p. 9) contends, social movements “are the producers of new values and goals around which the institutions of society are transformed to represent these values by creating new norms to organize social life,” the social movements that have emerged in postapartheid South Africa aim to challenge the norms of the market-driven, neoliberal economic policies adopted by the African National Congress government and to claim the socioeconomic rights enshrined in the constitution (Chiumbu et al., 2016, p. 3). A range of new social movements appeared in South Africa in the late 1990s to challenge the neoliberal foundations upon which postapartheid economic policies were being constructed and the effects these policies would have on the poor in terms of housing, health care, and delivery of basic services. These included movements such as the Anti-Privatisation Forum, the Anti-Eviction Campaign, the Treatment Action Campaign, and the shack-dwellers’ organization Abahlali baseMjondolo. As Chiumbu (2015, p. 4) points out, these organized movements have dwindled in recent years, making way for movements that are more loosely structured and that engage in more sporadic, inchoate protests. Because these protests are ongoing and challenge the norms and values of the state and the general political discourse, they qualify as social movements more in terms of their political orientation and mobilization than in terms of their structure and organization. They are perhaps best described as grassroots movements that organize and mobilize from the ground up in response to grievances that are specific to particular contexts yet relate to broader, shared socioeconomic concerns. Although several of the issue-based organizations focus their activism on social issues, there are also political undertones to the content of their activities, and some maintain organic, albeit informal, links to political parties. This dual scope of activities complicates any attempt to put a singular tag on their activism.

Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) argue that movements are dependent upon the mass media to reach their constituencies through public discourse, for validation, and to broaden the scope of conflict. But social movements are only one source of news among many competing for attention, which they do not always receive. Media coverage is a central component of social movement activities, but biases in coverage have been well documented (Koopmans, 2004). As Koopmans argues, media discourse is also a crucial source of strategic information for activists, upon which they base decisions and provide information for their future strategies. In the South African context, Dawson (2012) has highlighted how the lack of coverage of social movement activities in mainstream mass media has led activists to use smaller scale media to publicize their struggles.

The term *nanomedia* was first used by Mojca Pajnik and John Downing (2008) to refer to small-scale media, typically operating with limited financial resources. This includes alternative media such as community radio or video, but also refers to “popular song, dance, street theatre, graffiti, murals, dress along with print, broadcasting, film and the internet” (Downing, 2010, p. 2.) The term *media* is thus understood broadly to include symbolic, ritual, and performative modes of communication. Downing (2010) lists examples of nanomedia to demonstrate the diverse application of the term to include flyers, jokes and songs, revolutionary pamphlets, dance performances, street theater, and even the diapers worn by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo who protested the Argentine military dictatorship in the 1970s. Dawson (2012) has highlighted how the lack of coverage of social movement activities in mainstream mass media has led to activists using smaller scale media to publicize their struggles. She highlights

demonstrations, dress, slogans, murals, songs, radio, dance, poetry, and political theater as examples of nanomedia used by community-based movements in South Africa, arguing that these play a key role in processes of mobilization. As Downing (2010) argues, nanomedia have long been a feature of the cultural and political landscape, even though they have not been widely studied.

Activism in Context

This study explores activism in the context of three democratization conflicts—community protests, xenophobic violence, and the 2015 State of the Nation address (SONA)—each briefly described in further detail below. The three cases were selected as instances of democratization conflicts in the context of South Africa’s transitioning democracy. Although SONA took place in 2015, community protests were ongoing at the time of the 2016 interviews, and the main instances of xenophobic violence occurred during 2008 and 2015.

The case of SONA was selected as an example of political conflict and the contestation of democratic values within the democratic state; although SONA is a multidimensional conflict, it can be seen within the category of power distribution and accountability. The rise of community protests in South Africa is an important part of social and economic transition. It is symbolic of a new era of political struggle in South Africa, with the vast majority of the population no longer swept away by the romantic notion of a democratic government with the former liberation movement as the ruling political party.

The multiple positions and strategic engagements adopted by urban community-based movements, combined with the complex character of neoliberal policies, produce often contradictory and always uneven politics that at times resonate with critiques of neoliberalism but also articulate as locally specific issues. The promotion of civil society and the centrality of images and opposition and engagement in reading civil society–state relationships are not particular to South Africa, but mirror international neoliberal and post-Marxist discourses on civil society and the state. (Oldfield & Stokke, 2007, p. 140)

The community protests represent a form of bottom-up resistance, raising issues of the politics of inclusion and exclusion.

The third case study deals with the phenomenon of xenophobic violence, which refers to attacks on African nationals residing in mostly South African townships. The perpetrators of these conflicts have been black South Africans. Although there is contestation around whether these attacks are xenophobic/Afrophobic or just acts of criminality in the context of poverty and inequality, xenophobic violence has become a fairly regular feature of South African life. This case is an example of a conflict raising issues of inclusion and exclusion. Whereas the other two case studies illustrate how conflict deepens democracy, this case is slightly different because xenophobic violence, while raising issues around citizenship and belonging, in some ways *challenges* democracy.

Community Protests

Since 2005, there has been an increase in service delivery protests, which address, inter alia, poor access to water and electricity, limited rollout of housing projects, lack of actual participation in local politics despite policy to that effect, and corruption and nepotism at the local council level (Alexander, 2010). This type of protest can be generically described as challenging ongoing inequality in one of the most unequal societies in the world. As highlighted above, these service delivery protests (or perhaps "community protests") have become a daily feature of South African life, with research showing an average of three such protests each day somewhere in South Africa.²

Xenophobic Violence

In 1994, South Africa became a new nation after the country's first democratic elections and was dubbed the "Rainbow Nation" by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, symbolizing a multicultural and multiracial country. But in recent years, the resurgence of a new wave of ethnic nationalism has resulted in a narrow racist and xenophobic articulation of the nation, with the other (foreigners) subjected to high levels of violence. This new nationalism focuses on internal othering and excludes social groups within the society and their access to state resources. The exclusionary approach to the nation during the postapartheid era means that foreigners "are perceived as threats by those who seek identity exclusivity in their nation-state attachment" (Valji, 2003, p.8).

Although violence and discrimination against foreign African nationals had been a feature of the preapartheid landscape, xenophobia has increased sharply in the post-1994 era. Incidences of xenophobic violence began to flare up in 2000, but perhaps the most widespread violence occurred in May 2008, when an outbreak of violence against foreign Africans living in the country resulted in a series of attacks that left more than 60 people dead and displaced thousands (Crush, 2001; Steinberg, 2005). On May 12, a series of riots began in Alexandra Township with violent attacks against nationals from Mozambique, Malawi, and Zimbabwe; these riots quickly spread to Gauteng Province, followed by Durban and Cape Town (Neocosmos, 2010). Several Somali shopkeepers were targeted in 2013, with one stoned to death and various shops looted and burned. Another spike in xenophobic incidents occurred in 2015 in Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape; and again in 2016 in Tshwane, when Pakistani, Somali, and other foreign-owned business were targeted for looting. In one month in 2000, seven xenophobic killings were reported in Cape Town (Valji, 2003).

The primary explanation for the rise in xenophobia has been economic, with the local refrain from citizens that "foreigners are stealing our jobs." Locals see foreign Africans as competing with them for jobs, housing, and other material resources to which they feel entitled. And, as mentioned earlier, the locals see the foreigners to be competing unfairly in certain low-wage sectors of the economy (Dodson, 2010). South Africa, like other African countries, experiences high levels of internal and external migration

² This is according to Africa Check, a fact-checking research portal based in South Africa. See <https://africacheck.org/reports/are-there-30-service-delivery-protests-a-day-in-south-africa-2/>

with an increase in urban populations in major centers; the resulting internal economic inequality is seen as a major contributing factor to the xenophobia.

The xenophobic violence is viewed as a democratization conflict in the sense that it is driven by South African citizens' desire for full inclusion and participation in the economic dispensation promised by democracy. In this instance, the present research explores civil society organizations' reactions to the xenophobic violence.

SONA 2015

In light of a key corruption scandal involving upgrades to the president's home, members of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) disrupted President Jacob Zuma's 2015 State of the Nation address with demands that the president "pay back the money." As Zuma delivered his address, EFF members of parliament interrupted him to ask when he would be paying back the money spent on his Nkandla home. The controversial 208 million rand (about \$23 million) security upgrade conducted at Zuma's personal homestead raised issues about his use of public funds for this purpose. EFF members were removed from the National Assembly chamber by police and security personnel, and the opposition felt that police had acted illegally and unconstitutionally. Members of the official opposition, the Democratic Alliance, walked out in protest of the use of police in the National Assembly. Moreover, cell phone blocking devices were used—referred to in the media as "signal blocking"—preventing journalists and others present from sending out information from their cell phones. The event was also controversial because television broadcasters were not allowed to show what was happening as EFF members were being removed. The so-called disorder clause exists to protect the "dignity" of the house, and several news outlets have campaigned to declare this clause unconstitutional.

All three cases studies have attracted a great deal of media coverage. While one (SONA) occurred within the locale of parliament—itsself often considered an important symbol of liberal democracy—the other two occurred in the theater of the country's streets and mainly townships. What they all share is a sense of frustration with the country's ills, from corruption to inequality, from unemployment to a state considered to be drifting toward authoritarianism.

Method

Interviewees were selected based on their involvement in the conflicts, and they were sampled using a snowball technique. We started with well-known individuals in activist organizations and encouraged them to suggest additional interviewees within or outside their organizations. We aimed at achieving a balance between activists from different types of organizations and those who were involved in different ways. We were careful to interview both junior and senior or more experienced activists, men and women, and people from formal nongovernmental organizations and those from community organizations or social movements. Interviews were conducted with activists who campaigned during SONA 2015 to "bring back the signal"; activists who were involved in organizing various community and service delivery protests; and activists who organized various antixenophobia campaigns. This article draws on 25 in-depth qualitative interviews conducted during 2016, with representatives from 10 local and

national activist movements, aiming for a representative distribution of interviewees across the organizations. In the case of SONA, we interviewed representatives from the Right2Know Campaign; for the other two cases, we included local organizations working directly on issues such as housing.

More than one respondent was chosen from each key social movement to allow for a range of opinions and a degree of triangulation. This type of interview is designed to explore an interviewee's point of view in detail. The interviews are lengthy, have a degree of flexibility and open-endedness, and involve fewer respondents than surveys (Priest, 2010, p. 223). The goal of the interviews was to gain an insider's perspective on media processes in activist and civil society organizations. Interviews are often used when participant observation or ethnographic methods are not feasible (Priest, 2010, p. 101), as is true in the present study.

The interview guide covered three main areas:

1. The types of political activism involved in the conflict cases
2. The use and influence of nanomedia and digital media in facilitating political activism and protest in the three cases
3. The impact of media coverage on activist strategies

Each interview began with a reconstruction technique intended to reconstruct the interviewee's own involvement in the selected democratization conflicts. At the start of each interview, activists were shown a copy of a newspaper item covering the conflict. They were asked to use the newspaper article to recall and reconstruct the processes involved in the emergence of the conflict as well as media coverage of the conflict. The aim of the reconstruction was to foster "retrospective introspection" and to take the interviewees back in time to remember particular circumstances while guiding them to refer to specific factors. We aimed to achieve important, descriptive, and in-depth narratives and insights that transcend the possibility of socially desired responses from the activists. The interviews continued in a semistructured manner, with a range of questions related to the three categories outlined above, probing activists' use of media and views on mainstream media coverage. Interviews were conducted in English, recorded and transcribed, and coded using the NVivo software package.

Discussion

Tenuous Relations With Mainstream Media

All the interviewed representatives of social movements indicated that they had some type of relationship with the mainstream media and that they viewed the media as important to their work. However, the predominant perception was that the media were not an entirely reliable partner. Community-based movements especially had an ambiguous relationship with the media. It appears that mainstream media is considered, on one hand, a critical partner for covering the movements' legitimate struggles in the immediate term and, on the other hand, part of the hated "system" in the long term. There was also a perception that the media selfishly concentrated on what it pleased and, in the process, told only part of the story. One activist whose organization was involved with a campaign to get the City

of Cape Town to make basic services available to communities located in informal settlements, said of the media: "They don't really report about the exact issues, because they always report about what happened during the protest, not about the real issues of why we do protest, so that's what is really happening" (Interview 19).

Another activist argued that their oft-vaunted role in society notwithstanding, newspapers in South Africa were marginal to the information needs of poor communities, and therefore irrelevant to building a community organization. The activist argued that part of the problem with the media was the juniorization of newsrooms (a process that has been ongoing for more than a decade; see De Beer & Steyn, 2002), which results in mediocre coverage of issues. The activist said:

That's how the journalists often, the younger ones, they don't know the issues and they want you to give them a lot of information and sometimes it's just not worth it to have spent so much time trying to explain things and to engage and then what comes out the other end is a misrepresentation. (Interview 8)

A representative of an organization that fights for the rights of illegal immigrants, especially in issues relating to arrests and detentions as well as xenophobic attacks, felt that mainstream media coverage not only tells an incomplete story but that it also inadvertently perpetuates stereotypes about African foreigners living in South Africa. The activist said:

Although I think the media is generally sympathetic towards issues relating to xenophobia, it's often not well informed. And because it's not well informed may unwittingly perpetuate stereotypes that exist. The stereotypes around the numbers of people in the country, their involvement in crime, their purpose for coming to South Africa. (Interview 4)

Some of the community activists interviewed decried the fact that the media agenda is divorced from the community agenda, and they felt that genuine community struggles are therefore only peripheral to the media. Media coverage of an organization's activities was described by one activist as "a big problem," because the media "don't really report what's really happening . . . they report half of the story or the highlights—they only get there when there is a burning issue, but they are not supportive in community struggles" (Interview 5).

What is interesting here is a contested interpretation of the role that journalism must play in public life, especially in a highly unequal country like South Africa. This relationship is characterized in many instances by a misunderstanding of how far journalists should go in covering community struggles. For example, one community movement based in Soweto admitted to "chucking out" journalists who turn up at its events but fail to publish stories about the activities. One activist from the movement also shared that:

We invite media and they get all excited and promise they will come, but during the event you hardly see them around, and after the event you look at the [news]paper, big and exciting as it may have been but you do not see [the report] in the paper, you

search the newspaper and [finally] you find a little article that says there was a protest in Soweto by a group of people. . . . We have discovered these people [journalists] are just fluke and not genuine . . . they take us for a ride, they stand with the authorities. (Interview 11)

By asking the interviewees to reflect on their interactions with the mainstream media, we intended to understand (some of) the background against which these activist movements adopted alternative communicative tools. What emerged in the interviews is a picture of a tenuous relationship between the organizations and the mainstream media. It is a kind of love-hate relationship in which the former needs the latter for enhanced visibility and the latter needs the former for news events, but where the content of coverage is contested most of the time. Activists' adoption of nanomedia is meant not to replace the mainstream media but to complement it as part of a repertoire of communicative strategies aimed at highlighting their struggles.

Communication Tools

Activists identified landlines and mobile phones as key communication tools, and they all indicated that e-mail (including mailing lists) is an important way to communicate with their membership. Instant-messenger services such as WhatsApp, Viber, and BlackBerry Messenger are also popular internal communication tools. South African organizations are also either using or developing mobile phone apps for communicating in their networks. For example, a South African nongovernmental organization working with migrant and refugee communities to deal with, among other things, xenophobic violence indicated that it was in "the final stage of setting up a mobile-based communication system with the broader refugee and migrant community" (Interview 15). Similarly, another organization also often uses a petition app—*amandla.mobi*—developed for civil society to build support around specific campaigns of public interest (Interview 21). The petitions are circulated on social media, and signatures are collected by clicking on a link posted on social media sites. In general, WhatsApp is used for immediate mobilization and information sharing, while e-mail is less popular—mostly used by more senior members for broad-level organizing, setting up meetings, and disseminating minutes.

Mobilization Strategies and Nanomedia

South African social movements engage in a repertoire of strategies both for internal mobilization within their membership and supporters as well as for advocacy to the outside world, especially in efforts to draw the state's attention to their problems. What is noteworthy here is the appropriation—sometimes simultaneous—of both traditional and new methodologies to achieve maximum impact. This use of communicative resources fits with the way Pajnik and Downing (2008) defined nanomedia—as small-scale media, typically operating with limited financial resources. The loud-hailer (or bullhorn) features prominently in most South African social movements as the tool of choice in mobilization, especially in community-based groups. One respondent noted that, given that most of the organization's activists were unemployed, "probably the fundamental tool [for mobilization] was direct action" (Interview 18). He added:

Of course we used your traditional mobilization tools, door-to-door, road shows, loud-hailing and we would go to the townships and person to person where it was direct communication which was very important. We would go in a van and say, "Come."

Pamphlets and T-shirts were also cited as critical mobilization tools. In campaigns against the privatization of essential services, T-shirts have become "very iconic," according to one interviewee, while murals and graffiti are also deployed as instruments of awareness-raising. One interviewee explained:

They [T-shirts] became very iconic. There was a lot of stuff happening in the townships . . . and graffiti and poster and T-shirts and the iconography that became associated with the [organization name] and the reverberations went beyond. . . . When we marched to the Constitutional Court, the police threw a ring around Hillbrow area and were arresting anyone wearing a red T-shirt, even those who had nothing to do with us. (Interview 7)

This use of clothing to signify a particular political position, mobilize support, and create a group identity can also be seen in mainstream politics, where certain colors are associated with parties (yellow for the African National Congress, blue for the Democratic Alliance, red for the EFF) and are worn at mass meetings, rallies, and marches. EFF members wear red overalls to parliament to signify solidarity with the working class. In addition to T-shirts, loud-hailers, pamphlets, and placards, some movements call in to radio talk shows to convey their messages, while others circulate photographs (including on social media platforms) depicting their struggles. In one instance, a Cape Town-based community organization protesting the lack of water facilities "hijacked" a local government building by publicly washing clothes—including underwear—and hanging them to dry in front of the building. One of the activists involved recalls:

And I said to myself: The Civic Centre belongs to the City of Cape Town. . . . So why don't we take all the people with their washing and their children and everybody from the settlement come bring their buckets which they use to do their washing, bring their washing powder and go there. . . . So I took all the people there and we got some water from there and we made use of the water there. And the people started doing their washing outside in the yard of the Civic and everybody was coming to see what's happening there and the washing was hanging right on the fence and the cars were passing there and they were hooting, they were hooting, and I said to the fat ladies: "Hang your panties there to the street side . . . not inside . . . to the street side," and cars were hooting and all of that. (Interview 4)

These examples describe how activists use different types of nanomedia to address different constituencies: Digital tools may be used to reach international audiences or gain support from members of the middle class, and more tangible and physical demonstrations are used to communicate to and mobilize citizens who may not have access to the Internet or with whom alternative forms of communication may resonate more strongly. This combination of different methods by activists confirms findings by Wasserman (2007) and Chiumbu (2015) that activists' decisions on which media to use are guided by their relationships with various constituencies.

Even though most of the activists interviewed used digital media tools, some reported that they rarely use their social media accounts because Internet access is expensive and poor citizens often do not have money to purchase Internet data even when they have access to smartphones or tablets. Rather than digital media, nanomedia emerged as a key alternative to mainstream media use.

Another common strategy is to use a middle-class activist as a go-between “switchboard” when communication involves sending messages from one community to another in resource-constrained circumstances. South African community activists frequently mentioned resource constraints as limiting their ability to communicate with one another. In addition, music and songs with protest marches are commonly used to mobilize support, and the tactic of physically occupying spaces is commonly used.

For smaller, community-based organizations, appropriation of ICTs is marginal in mobilization for protest action. According to more than half of the interviewees, their organizational websites were either dysfunctional or nonexistent at the time of the protest action. In a few instances, respondents revealed that they piggybacked their communication on other organizations that had better facilities. This would involve, for example, announcing their protest plans and mobilization agendas on the websites and social media platforms of the sister organizations. On whether their organization used any ICTs for their mobilization, a respondent from the same organization stated that this type of use was minimal, if it was used at all. Because of the living conditions in the community, the respondent said, they once had a computer “but it was stolen” (Interview 5). One organization formed primarily to fight the Secrecy Bill (but eventually expanded to advocate for a range of other freedoms in the information sector) uses WhatsApp and other social media platforms as its core pillars for mobilization. A member reflected on the group’s communication strategies thus:

So we have a Google list and also our website . . . we always post things on that wall. We also have a Facebook page where if people want to know about us, want to communicate with us. . . . But like within ourselves, as I have said, we meet each and every first Monday of the month. Nationally, we have a telecon[ference] that we have . . . like it’s a national working group member, working group that heads a telecon each and every first Friday of the month whereby we also discuss the problems. But the thing is like I think the most important thing that makes us to communicate is the Google list that we have . . . we always share what’s happening. (Interview 3)

Another organization campaigning for the rights of refugees—and that, in recent years, has had to deal with xenophobic violence—also boasts a fairly “professionalized” communication strategy, which involves substantial appropriation of ICTs. Because it is relatively well resourced in comparison with most community organizations, the movement can afford to employ a full-time staff member to handle its communication. A member interviewed said:

We also do a couple of newsletters every year. We have a full-time journalist, who helps us with our media and communication work. And then for our board meetings we obviously compile quite comprehensive and dense reports on activities, issues. And with clients we communicate in different ways through face-to-face communication,

consultations, using e-mails and telephones and sometimes working through community representatives. And we are in the final stage of setting up a mobile-based communication system with the broader refugee and migrant community. We'll see how effective that will be using USSD [unstructured supplementary service data] technology where people can register through their handsets and then through that USSD then you mine for information. And through the dual location whatever they can be linked to service providers in government or nongovernmental. (Interview 21)

Use of Social Media

While it is widely acknowledged that referring to the Egyptian uprising of early 2011 as a "Facebook uprising" represents an oversimplification of the events that transpired, the role of social media in activist struggles is also widely acknowledged. "Social media are not simply neutral tools to be used or adopted by social movements, but rather influence how activists form and shape the social movements" (Lim, 2012, p. 234). In the South African context, activists use social media alongside traditional media, primarily to raise awareness about their causes. Twitter, for example, is used as a platform to highlight information about specific activities as well as to disseminate more general information. All the activists interviewed consider social media (Twitter in particular) an important tool that they use to communicate with journalists to get mainstream media coverage for their activities. Activist groups indicated that journalists often follow them on social media, so that when their organizations release reports or invitations via social media, journalists will contact them for comments. As one activist reflected, "We would tweet at them [journalists] all the time so they will decide to come and cover the event because they know we were going to annoy them" (Interview 8).

Twitter was also seen as crucial for general awareness raising, particularly for circulating messages to middle-class spaces to generate support and solidarity. As one activist reflected,

I think it is important in a sense that, for instance, like if you post each and everything that's happening on social media, like, for instance, this is what's happening, this is what's happening, you tend to find other people who are in the same situation as yours. And that's where solidarity and unity starts. (Interview 6)

Despite potential positives, several activists interviewed also reflected on the limits of social media for political organizing in terms of reach and in terms of the types of information people respond to on social media. The general consensus was that people are generally reluctant to engage with posts on topics of political importance, while they engage frequently on matters related to celebrity and popular culture. Activists who use social media believe it is a useful way to gather support as well as generate ideas for tackling problems, because activists from other communities connect and share their experiences and suggestions. Facebook is often used for lateral linkages to connect with similar movements both within the country and internationally, often leading to the building of important relationships. Activists felt that it could be a useful tool in building specific campaigns, but few activists were social media champions. Social media is primarily seen as important for raising awareness and for networking with activist groups nationally and even internationally.

Some activists see social media as a tool used to enhance public engagement, coordinate off-line action, and for instant dissemination and exchange of information. Twitter is used as a “choreography of assembly” (Gerbaudo, 2012) to coordinate off-line activities. Rather than being the primary method of communication and mobilization, digital and social media serve as complementary tools for South African activists. The use of social media raises issues around the complexity of leadership structures in activist movements; more senior leaders are usually responsible for managing the social media accounts, and they tend to be middle class and English speaking, highlighting divisions within the movements. Facebook is less popular, because it is not seen to have the immediacy of Twitter.

Conclusion

The instances of digital media and nanomedia use recalled by activists involved in democratization conflicts can be argued to stem from different social and political forces in South African society. First, the issue of equitable access to mainstream media has been debated since the democratization of the country, and it continues to be important for policy making. The print media industry in particular has often been criticized for being slow to transform and for being oriented toward middle-class audiences. The cost of access to print and online media for poor citizens coupled with the huge economic inequalities in the country, which orients commercial media toward the publics that advertisers are likely to be interested in, has served to exclude the poor from print media agendas. The failure of the public service broadcaster to step into this gap, exacerbated by corruption and political agendas, has been the target of civil society campaigns. These campaigns have also engaged in nanomedia protests (e.g., flyers, stickers, marches) to focus attention on the shortcomings of both the commercial and public service media.

Given the problems around access, activists from marginalized communities may decide to resort to forms of protest that are likely to attract print media attention (Wasserman, Chuma, & Bosch, 2018), such as burning tires and barricading roads. The examples of nanomedia use highlighted in this article can be seen as a strategy for activists to overcome the challenges of access to mainstream media as well as unequal access to digital media. The inequalities in access to these different media platforms necessitate multipronged strategies by activists to tailor their media use to the various audiences they are trying to reach. This combination of different methods also gives pause to overly celebratory accounts of digital media as platforms for resistance to neoliberalism and institutional power; rather, they should be seen as one node in a communication network, which includes online and off-line networks, preexisting social networks, and new communicative networks (including, but not limited to, digital platforms) formed in the process of activism itself (Castells, 2015, p. 249).

Second, the use of nanomedia, as reported by the activists, stems from a skepticism about the mainstream media’s agendas. There is a strong sense among activists that the mainstream media is not really interested in the problems of the poor, and that the media only pays attention when protests take a violent turn and make for the type of attractive news coverage that adheres to conventional news values of conflict. The use of nanomedia to either pique the mainstream media’s attention or to circumvent the mainstream media completely could therefore also be read as a critique of the self-interested and hedonistic orientation of the mainstream—especially commercial—media. Although these interviews were

conducted before the public broadcaster SABC announced that it would henceforth refuse to broadcast footage of violent protests, it can be assumed that such attempts to black out forms of protest that had been aimed at attracting media attention may lead to increased exploration of alternative avenues by activists for getting their messages across to a wider public.

Third, the use of nanomedia may be seen against the broader background of communication use in African contexts, where networks of orality exist side by side with more formal media channels and serve to complement or circumvent mainstream narratives. Ellis's (1989) notion of *radio trottoir* (pavement radio) has been used by scholars (see, e.g., Willems, 2010, commenting on the Zimbabwean context) to indicate how jokes, gossip, and rumor are used by citizens and activists to provide alternative narratives to the ones produced by mainstream or state media. Nanomedia may be seen to fulfill similar functions. Increasingly, digital media technologies and social media may be seen to fulfill this role (Mabweazara, 2016; Mare, 2013) despite the challenges of access, and these technologies are often used to complement or amplify more traditional channels of communication such as door-to-door canvassing, telephoning, and marching (Wasserman, 2007).

This exploration of South African activists' use of nanomedia suggests the need for a contextually informed understanding of how mainstream media, alternative media, and other networks of communication coexist, complement, and sometimes compete in settings marked by conflict and inequality. Nanomedia has very different audiences, forms, functions, messages, and purposes and is not simply a substitute for mass media. Internal communication across civil society organizations and social movements in South Africa is hugely varied, depending on the level of formality, access to resources, and geographic spread. Formal, well-resourced organizations tend to use e-mail lists, messaging services such as WhatsApp and BlackBerry Messenger, and formal printed publications such as pamphlets, newsletters, infographics, and reports. Community-based groups, however, tend to have poor Internet access and limited resources, so word of mouth, going door-to-door, and walking among houses with a loud-hailer to call people to meetings is much more common.

Within the South African social movement sector there exists a dual regime of ICTs' usage. On one hand, resource-strapped community-based organizations fighting for basic services rely on cost-effective traditional communicative strategies (South Africa has the highest costs of communication among the BRICS [Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa] and among medium-developed countries). On the other hand are professionalized, larger, and possibly better resourced organizations (e.g., Right2Know) that fully appropriate the range of ICTs, including social media platforms. In the latter organizations, ICTs do not necessarily supplant the use of traditional media and other traditional strategies; rather, the two approaches are complementary. In the current context of "widespread perception of the failings of liberal democratic politics as currently organized, leading to the confidence gap between political parties and large sections of the public" (Downing, 2010, p. 9), the use of digital media and nanomedia by activist movements can help fill that gap and strengthen citizen participation in democracy.

References

- Alexander, P. (2010). Rebellion of the poor: South Africa's service delivery protests: A preliminary analysis. *Review of African Political Economy*, 37(123), 25–40.
- Booth, J., & Richard, P. (1998). Civil society, political capital, and democratization in Central America. *Journal of Politics*, 60(3), 780–800.
- Castells, M. (2008). The new public sphere: Global civil society, communication networks, and global governance. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 616, 78–93.
- Castells, M. (2015). *Networks of outrage and hope: Social movements in the Internet age*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Chiumbu, S. (2015). Social movements, media practices and radical democracy in South Africa. *French Journal for Media Research*, 4, 1–20.
- Chiumbu, S., Reddy, V., Bohler-Muller, N., Gumede, N. A., & Mtshengu, A. (2016). Social justice for the poor: The framing of socioeconomic rights in selected South African newspapers. *Journalism*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1177/1464884916671897
- Crush, J. (2001). The dark side of democracy: Migration, xenophobia and human rights in South Africa. *International Migration*, 38(6), 103–133.
- Dawson, M. (2012). Protest, performance and politics: The use of "nano-media" in social movement activism in South Africa. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 17(3), 321–345.
- De Beer, A., & Steyn, E. (2002). Sanef's "2002 South African National Journalism Skills Audit." *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies*, 23(2), 11–86.
- Dodson, B. (2010). Locating xenophobia: Debate, discourse, and everyday experience in Cape Town, South Africa. *Africa Today*, 56(3), 2–22.
- Downing, J. (2010, March). *Nanomedias: "Community" media, "network" media, "social movement" media: Why do they matter? And what's in a name?* Paper presented at the Mitjans comunitaris, moviments socials i xarxes conference, Barcelona, Spain. Abstract retrieved from http://www.portalcomunicacion.com/catunesco/download/2010_Downing_Nanomedias_english.pdf
- Ellis, S. (1989). Tuning in to pavement radio. *African Affairs*, 88(352), 321–330.
- Foley, M., & Edwards, B. (1996). The paradox of civil society. *Journal of Democracy*, 7(3), 38–52.

- Gamson, W., & Wolfsfeld, G. (1993). Movements and media as interacting systems. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 528(1), 114–125.
- Gerbaudo, P. (2012). *Tweets and the streets: Social media and contemporary activism*. New York, NY: Pluto Press.
- Glasius, M. (2010). Uncivil society. In H. K. Anheier & S. Toepler (Eds.), *International encyclopedia of civil society* (pp. 1583–1588). New York, NY: Springer.
- Koopmans, R. (2004). Movements and media: Selection processes and evolutionary dynamics in the public sphere. *Theory and Society*, 33, 367–391.
- Kopecky, P., & Mudde, C. (2003). *Uncivil Society? Contentious politics in post-communist Europe*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Lewis, D. (2001). *Civil society in non-Western contexts: Reflections on the "usefulness" of a concept* (Civil Society Working Paper Series No. 13). London, UK: Centre for Civil Society, London School of Economics and Political Science.
- Lim, M. (2012). Clicks, cabs and coffee houses: Social media and oppositional movements in Egypt, 2004–2011. *Journal of Communication*, 62, 231–248.
- Mabweazara, H. (2016). Mainstreaming African digital cultures, practices and emerging forms of citizen engagement. *African Journalism Studies*, 36(4), 1–11.
- Marais, H. (2011). *South Africa pushed to the limit: The political economy of change*. London, UK: Zed Books.
- Mare, A. (2013). A complicated by symbiotic affair: The relationship between mainstream media and social media in the coverage of social protests in southern Africa. *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies*, 34(1), 83–98.
- Neocosmos, M. (2010). *From "foreign natives" to "native foreigners": Explaining xenophobia in post-apartheid South Africa: Citizenship and nationalism, identity and politics*. Oxford, UK: African Books Collective.
- Oldfield, S., & Stokke, K. (2007). Political polemics and local practices of community organizing and neoliberal politics in South Africa. In H. Leitner, J. Peck, & E. Sheppard (Eds.), *Contesting neoliberalism: Urban frontiers* (pp. 139–155). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Pajnik, M., & Downing, J. (2008). Introduction: The challenges of nano-media. In M. Pajnik & J. Downing (Eds.), *Alternative media and the politics of resistance: Perspectives and challenges* (pp. 7–16). Ljubljana, Slovenia: Peace Institute.

- Priest, S. (2010). *Doing media research: An introduction*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Putnam, R. (2001). Social capital: Measurement and consequences. *Canadian Journal of Policy Research*, 2(1), 41–51.
- Spasić, I. (2003). Civil society in Serbia after Milošević: Between authoritarianism and wishful thinking. *Polish Sociological Review*, 144, 445–461.
- Steinberg, J. (2005, June). *A mixed reception: Mozambican and Congolese refugees in South Africa* (ISS Monograph Series No. 117). Peoria, South Africa: Institute for Security Studies. Retrieved from https://web.archive.org/web/20081003222623/http://www.iss.co.za/dynamic/administration/file_manager/file_links/117FULL.PDF
- Valji, N. (2003). *Creating the nation: The rise of violent xenophobia in the new South Africa* (Unpublished master's thesis). York University, Toronto, Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/file%20uploads%20/riseofviolent.pdf>
- Wasserman, H. (2007). Is a new World Wide Web possible? An explorative comparison of the use of ICTs by two South African social movements. *African Studies Review*, 50(1), 109–131.
- Wasserman, H., Bosch, T., & Chuma, W. (2016, January 22). Voices of the poor are missing from South Africa's media. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/voices-of-the-poor-are-missing-from-south-africas-media-53068>
- Wasserman, H., Chuma, W., & Bosch, T. (2018). Print media coverage of service delivery protests in South Africa: A content analysis. *African Studies*, 77(1), 145–156.
- Willems, W. (2010). At the crossroads of the formal and popular: Convergence culture and new publics in Zimbabwe. In H. Wasserman (Ed.), *Popular media, democracy and development in Africa* (pp. 46–62). London, UK: Routledge.