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**A content analysis on Facebook group, New Political Forum- South African mobile participation in online Public Spheres .**

Pierrinne Leukes LKSPIE001

A minor dissertation submitted in *partial fulfilment* of the requirements for the award  
of the degree of Master of Arts in Political Communication

Faculty of the Humanities  
University of Cape Town  
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**COMPULSORY DECLARATION**

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: 31 August 2012

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I appreciate the many who have died during The Struggle for my opportunity to pursue my educational qualifications at a university like UCT. I will never take their sacrifices for granted. Never before in my life did I dream that I would be finishing my Masters at the age of 23.

*"It's what the Lord has done in me"*

## **Abstract**

This mini-dissertation aims to characterize mobile participation in the South African citizen-led Facebook Group, New Political Forum. It also investigates whether the participation on New Political Forum meets Poor's (2005) criteria for an Online Public Sphere, as adapted from Habermasian concepts of the Public Sphere (Habermas, 1976).

The study employed content analysis as its methodology to investigate a random sample drawn from all the posts and comments posted to New Political Forum on every other week day during the period 3 April to 3 May 2012. Three levels of coding were performed on the sampled data. The first level of coding used the Facebook API to determine whether the post and comments were posted via mobile applications or other platforms such as laptops and desktop computers. The second level coded the kind of social interaction which the post represented, according to six categories intended to characterise the way in which users used the group to initiate in debate and find information. Lastly the word count of each post was captured so as to establish its size.

Findings revealed that 60% of all posts, and 54% of all comments in the sample were posted from mobile applications. This indicates that, during the period of study, although computers and laptops were playing a disproportionately important role (given limited access to these platforms in South Africa), participation via mobile applications nonetheless accounted for the bulk of participation. Regarding the social interactions on the site, during the month in question, 90% of posts either initiated debate or shared information with the group. Patterns of interaction via mobile applications were similar to the kinds of interaction which took place from other platforms. Posts from mobile applications nonetheless included fewer hyperlinks and pictures than other sources did. The major difference between mobile and other forms of participation related to the relative brevity of mobile posts. The mean word count of mobile posts was almost half the mean word count of posts from other platforms. Thus even though mobile posts were more frequently posted; they were very often shorter than the contributions from other sources.

Applying Poor's (2005) Online Public Sphere it was found that New Political Forum does qualify to be considered an Online Public Sphere. This is because the group's history, focus and governance by committed volunteer administrators created a space for inclusive political debates and discussions where the identities of the members played a minimal role in influencing the reception of their ideas. It is suggested that information sharing should be added to Poor's criteria because of the role it plays in debate and opinion formation.

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## **Introduction**

This year, President Jacob Zuma invited South African citizens to use social media to suggest discussion topics for his annual State of the Nation address (Citypress Online, 2012). When former President Nelson Mandela was admitted to hospital in 2012, the Presidency avoided the spread of wild rumours by releasing statements regarding his well-being on Facebook and Twitter (News24, 2012). The main opposition, the Democratic Alliance also frequently hosts town hall-like meetings on Twitter to engage with the public about their political grievances (DA Youth Website, 2012). The government is gradually increasingly employing social media to engage with South Africans.

Internet access in South Africa has tripled in the last decade, but penetration remains low at 13,9% of the country's 50 million population (Internet World Stats, 2011). In South Africa the internet is becoming an important source of general information, and of news (Van Jaarsveld, 2012:18). This means that the majority of South African's could be excluded from the attempts by government to connect with citizens online, and that they could be left behind in the shift towards online news.

An ethnography done in a small coloured township in the region of the Eastern Cape sheds light on how the mobile phone has been so intricately linked to the identities of people, despite the dangers of living in high crime zones (Schoon, 2011). The author relays a story about one of the female participants who was held at gunpoint for the second time for her mobile phone, but still tried to negotiate with them for her SIM card (2011:51). This is an extreme example which echoes findings by Skuse and Cousins (2009) expressing the importance of the mobile phone for maintaining and managing social relations especially amongst the working classes of South Africa.

Mobile phones may play an important role in bridging the gap between ADSL internet users and the majority without broadband, or any kind of landline access. Mobile penetration in South Africa exceeded 100% in 2009 (ITU, 2009b). In low income communities people often share phones or use communal phone outlets (Skuse & Cousins, 2008:16). The most recent wave of handsets has opened up mobile internet access which is reportedly used by 39% of urban and 27 % of rural South Africans (World Wide Worx, 2010). Nearly half of all internet users are Facebook users (Internet World Stats, 2011) making it the most actively used social media site in the country according to the latest research (World Wide Worx, 2012). Smartphones such as BlackBerry and Nokia have created packages which allow unlimited internet access for the limited cost of R60 (Goldstruck, 2012). This project investigates how mobile access of social media could contribute to narrowing the gap between the South African government and its people.

There have been attempts to use mobile phones for political communication by both government and citizens. SMS campaigns by the ANC and the DA during the local elections in 2011 were mostly received with disdain by youth in certain areas of the country due mainly to their desire for dialogue, as opposed to one-sided communication by the government (Hyde-Clarke, 2012). Even South Africans in lower income brackets who rely on prepaid access and cheaper feature phones have participated enthusiastically in various forms of online political communication, despite the challenges presented by mobile interfaces and high costs of airtime (Walton & Leukes, 2012). Given that public debates and discussions in South Africa are no longer as fervent and popular as they were before the country's democratization in 1994 in both urban (Heller, 2001:144-146) and rural (LiPuma & Koelbie, 2009) areas of the country, it was thought that it would be interesting to investigate whether mobile phones and social media have in any way facilitated participation in online public spheres (Habermas, 1976).

As mentioned previously, Facebook is one of the most popular sites in South Africa. Social media sites such as Facebook have played a facilitative role in political campaigning (Shirky, 2008; Zhang et al, 2010) providing citizens with a platform where they can express allegiance or dissent(OECD, 2007:65) and allowing forms of organization and mobilisation which have arguably been instrumental in overthrowing governments in the Middle East and North Africa (Khalil, 2011). Given the key role of Facebook in contemporary South African political participation, it is worth considering in what kinds of public debate and discussion are possible on the platform.

## **Facebook**

Facebook is a social network site where users create profiles detailing their personal information, and share it with other users, in turn creating a network (boyd & Ellison, 2008:11). In the earlier incarnations of Facebook, users who shared interests were able to create and join 'groups' which were essentially collective profiles which collected posts and content under the editorial control of group administrators. As the site evolved a stronger commercial identity, companies, organizations, celebrities and political parties gained the ability to manage specialised commercial profiles which are called Facebook fan pages. Facebook groups and fan pages differ in the participation rights they afford to those who view and use these groups and pages.

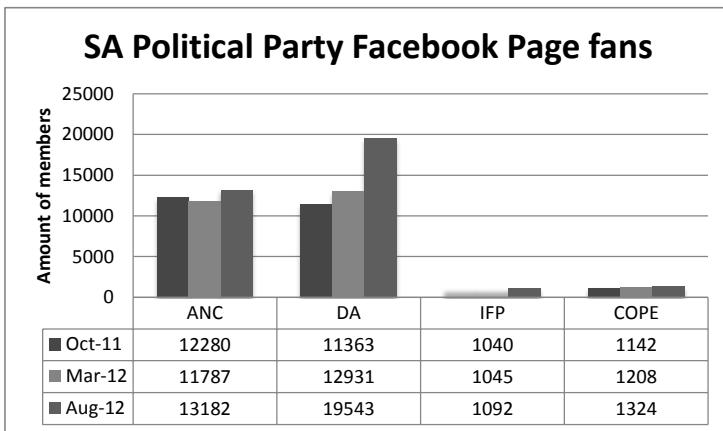
Facebook pages were introduced in 2007 and are designed for celebrities, brands and businesses. They may be created by users with either personal accounts or business accounts. Pages allow updates to be sent to large numbers of 'fans' and are thus associated with the 'official' presence of brands and public figures. They provide the latest information regarding these organizations,

individuals or brands. On a Facebook page, the users are called fans and they become fans by clicking the word “Like” on the Fan page. In doing so, the ‘fan’ receives updates from this Facebook page and can interact with other fans via the ‘wall’ of the Facebook page. Brands can limit their fan’s rights to posting updates or commenting on official updates. On the other hand they can allow fans to participate freely by adding their own posts where they ask questions, express dismay or happiness with the brand or individual owner of the page.

By contrast, Facebook groups can only be created by users with a personal account and are used to connect individuals with common interests for organizations and special issue groups. Group members are encouraged to engage (Levy, 2010:61) in discussion with one another as well as with the organization. Unlike with pages, access to groups needs to be granted by an administrator who adds members to the group and determines the level of privacy for the group. While groups focus on dialogue and debate, and arguably foreground users’ identities as citizens, the introduction of Facebook pages has shifted focus to forms of commoditized engagement and consumer identities.

Pages offer a wider range of functionality than groups; the ability to limit participation, to provide applications offering specific features to fans, to track user traffic via ‘insights; to customise page appearance, and enhanced search engine optimisation.

Pages represent a specific brand, whether it be a person or a company, while groups allow engagement around issues and special topics. Therefore, if citizens want to have a Facebook presence to initiate discussions and have a direct connection with other citizens, a Facebook group would be recommended. By contrast, pages allow brands or organisations to have an official Facebook presence and greater control over their engagement with ‘fans’. South Africa’s governing party, main opposition and two smaller opposition parties all have a Facebook presence, and have all opted for Facebook pages. The growth of fans on these pages over the period October 2011 to August 2012 is shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1 Fans of official Facebook pages of major South African political parties (Oct 2011 – Aug 2012)**

It is revealing that South African political parties have opted to have fans instead of members.

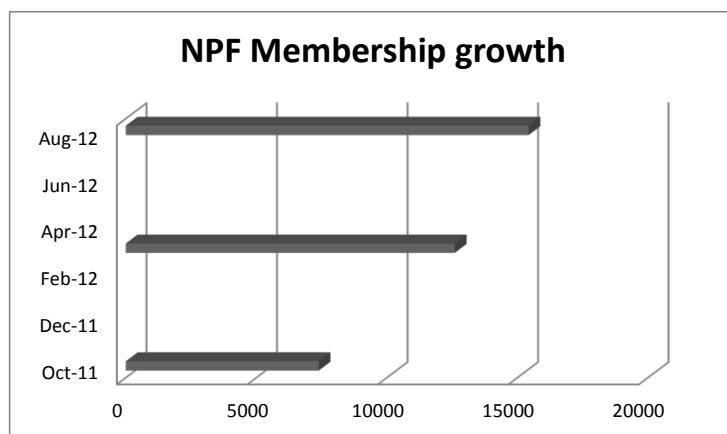
Despite the advantages of pages for large organisations, which need to manage interactions with the public, they are not necessarily ideal ways to facilitate democratic discourse, engagement or mobilisation. This is particularly the case given that all these political parties have changed the format of their fan pages so as to prevent fans from initiating discussions on their pages. Fans on these pages can only respond to the posts contributed by the political parties themselves. This puts the power of agenda setting firmly in the hands of the political parties.

These pages were therefore not the best areas to find political debates created and led by South African citizens.

## New Political Forum

While South African parties have opted for fan pages, this dissertation explores the way in which citizens have used groups to facilitate political debate, with a particular focus on a group known as the New Political Forum. I first found the New Political Forum via a link from the ANC Fan page. It was created in August 2010 by five members who belonged to the previous ANC Facebook group which no longer exists. The forum arose in 2009 out of the need for freer debate. One of the founding members was banned from the old ANC group after initiating a debate which one of the group administrators disapproved of (New Political Forum History, 2011). Since then the group's

membership has been growing rapidly (see Figure 2) to the point that, with over 15 000 members, it is currently larger than the Facebook page of the governing party.



**Figure 2 New Political Forum Facebook Group membership growth**

In this group members are at liberty to initiate discussions on the topics of their choice, and to respond and engage with other members by commenting on the posts on the group wall. Information about each contribution includes the time stamp as well as whether the contribution came from a mobile application or not. On the fan pages of the political parties, the application used to post the contribution is not made available.

This project aims to investigate mobile participation on the New Political Forum (NPF) group in the light of growing mobile access in South Africa. As early as 2008 research showed that many South African teens (68%) from low-income areas used a mobile phone to access the internet almost on a daily basis (Kreutzer, 2009: ii). Three years later more airtime is spent on data than text messaging, and Facebook usage has increased from 16% to 38 % in the last year alone (World Wide Worx, 2012). Mobile internet access to groups such as NPF could be a platform where those who do not have ADSL internet but use their phones for access instead could be included. This is not to forgo the possibility that those currently using mobiles to access NPF do have ADSL connection but simply choose to use their mobile phones for the sake of convenience. However, the extent of their usage of the mobile phone can indicate the extent to which mobile only users are able to participate as well.

This project will investigate whether the New Political Forum can be considered an online public sphere which might be playing a role in filling the void in South African public discourse post 1994.

As mentioned before, accessing the internet and Facebook groups such as the New Political Forum from a mobile phone comes with challenges. This mini-dissertation therefore addresses the following research questions:

*What is the character of mobile participation in the Facebook Group, New Political Forum as an online public sphere?*

*In addition, how can Content Analysis on the web and Facebook API be used to understand participation in this Facebook Group?*

## **Chapter Two: Literature review**

This literature review begins with an overview of seminal articles written about Mobile Activism in the last ten years. Following that, Mobile Activism in Africa and South Africa are considered. This chapter then concludes with a section reviewing the use of Facebook for political communication.

### **Mobile Activism**

There are many lenses through which one can view the way in which mobiles have transformed elements within society. One such lens is that citizens have been conceptualised as “nodes” and forming part of “smart mobs” (Rheingold, 2002:170). This view emphasises the network wherein which members of society function and organize themselves. This network is unhindered by physical distance as the nodes transcend geography and instantly connect through their mobile phones (Urry, 2007:171-180). This strengthens and intensifies the connections between the nodes that can be in contact at any time. Societal dependence on mobiles has in some cases led to mobile addiction which has been proven to have a positive relationship with increasing feelings of loneliness amongst the youth especially (Park, 2005). While these connections are mainly used for the maintenance of interpersonal relationships, they can also be used for activism (Gergen, 2008). Even though the connectedness and organizational capabilities make the mobile phone appropriate for use in activism, the prerequisite of an active citizenry remains (Kreutz, 2010). Other obstacles to mobile activism include urban-rural inequality and varying levels of mobile technological sophistication.

Cheap SMSs led to a practice of forwarding messages in the Philippines, which is how text messages of dissent and mobilization against the President Estrada began to circulate through the different communities (Rafael, 2003:410). In this way mass protests were organized promptly and efficiently, a strength which enabled the movement to effectively overthrow the government. In this case, the low cost of mobile messaging and an enthused citizenry were crucial to the success of the protests.

Three case studies have provided evidence of the facilitating role cell phones play in the dissemination of information and alternative views (Miard, 2009). This was proven during emergency situations such as the Chinese SARS virus and the Sumatra-Andaman Tsunami where SMS was frequently employed to disseminate information when governments had not yet released information, or in the case of China, government purposefully decided to withhold or misrepresent the severity of the situation (Gordon, 2007). Information shared and received from alternative sources of media is referred to as backchannel information (Langer, 2009:2) and the mobile phone has clearly been used in the dissemination of this kind of information when considering the above-mentioned examples.

## Mobile Activism in Africa

When the Mozambican government announced a forthcoming increase in bread and local transport costs during 2008 widespread protests ensued. Using mobile phones, the public informed and kept updating a popular blogger about the protest action happening across the county providing evidence that the mobile was used for activism 3 years before the Arab Uprisings which have often been credited with the protest appropriation (Doctors & Paterson, 2012:5). This has also been experienced in the Great Lakes region where mobile phones have ensured that journalists are always within reach to receive tip-offs, but also to protect the journalists by keeping them informed about fast developing dangers in certain areas in advance (Frere, 2009). Yet, it is the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions that have some believing that Africa is on the brink of massive socio-political overhauls because of the mobile internet which facilitated many of the Arab and North African revolutions (Bohler-Muller & van der Merwe, 2011).

This line of thinking is cyber-utopian at best. Many other instrumental factors were present in the contexts which led to revolution, such as increased media censorship. This occurred in Kenya during the national election of 2008 when government induced media clampdowns prevented both citizens and international media from being informed about violent protests and led to the creation of a mobile platform called Ushahidi (Okolloh, 2009). Through SMSs sent by citizens to the website, all Kenyans and members of the international community, who had internet access, could be updated about the electoral violence and protests that were occurring across the country. Both these examples exhibit the resourcefulness of citizens when government has controlled the media. Therefore, even though mobile and mobile internet were necessary, they were not sufficient. Another example which elucidates this is in two projects, run in Zambia and Uganda respectively, where a wide array of communications technologies were made available for women (Wakuma-Zoyer & Litho, 2009). The mobile phone was the technology they favoured the most because they could use it in their language, unlike computers and most of the internet, and they used it to empower themselves financially. However, the mobile phones could not empower these women politically because the government had no platforms to engage with these members of rural society.

Besides the aforementioned limitations to mobile phones and mobile activism in Africa, there are those who believe that the mobile phone has had adverse effects on society. Goliama (2011) writes that the possibility of liberation is outweighed by the reality of further enslavement of African people who cannot afford the high maintenance costs of airtime and electricity necessary for mobile phone use. His use of only anecdotal evidence lacks the empirical data necessary to make such a broad claim. Enhancements in the political sphere include Bunge SMS in Kenya which has enabled

direct SMS contact between constituents and parliamentary representatives, and provided protection for whistle blowers of corruption in Tanzania (2011: 53-56). The mobile phone has created a safe space and empowered members of society to connect with each other as well as hold more powerful members of society accountable.

The gist of the interpretation of the literature in this section is to remain realistic about the limitations of mobile activism in Africa but to remain open to the possibilities that could be realised through the mobile phone, which acts in collaboration with many different aspects and members of society. There is thus a reciprocal relationship between the mobile and society (Nyamnjoh et al, 2009). This accounts for the different experiences of the mobile phone and mobile activities across the wide variety of societies. Similarly, Wasserman (2011) suggests that investigating the daily practices and appropriations of the mobile phone in specific societies will give more realistic insights into how mobile phones are being used for political participation by African people. Their participation might not be overtly political by for example, calling or SMS'ing their political councillors or parliament members directly. Instead, their habitual practices of sharing or using media content from pop culture are likely to be enmeshed with their own kind of political participation or lack thereof (2012: 150). This line of thinking creates the need to investigate the mobile uses in South Africa specifically. The following section provides an overview of the literature reviewing mobile activism in South Africa.

## **Mobile Activism in South Africa**

Even when investigating mobile activism in South Africa it remains important to be specific about regions and the effects of specific certain projects. This section tries to create a better picture of the mobile activism landscape in South Africa by reviewing projects according to their regions.

In the Kwa-Zulu Natal province the Umnyango, an SMS based project, was created for the purpose of empowering women (Naidoo,2010). The aim was to empower women financially through receiving agricultural improvement methods and socially through being able to report crime and cases of domestic abuse. The impact study concluded that the airtime and infrastructure costs were high, especially considering that the funds allocated towards the project could rather have been directly spent on the women of this project. Naidoo notes that this is the result of making the mobile the central component of a project, as opposed to using it as a tool which complements organization (2010:84).

A second programme run in this province is the Ulwazi programme. The local libraries have capitalized on the popularity of mobile internet, and created a platform for Zulu speakers to share

content via their mobile phones in their language about a wide range of topics ranging from cultural practices to recipes to a mobile application (McNulty, 2012). In this manner, the author writes that “previously marginalised communities now have online access to local knowledge, along with the prospect of participating in the global information society and bridging the digital divide” (McNulty, 2012:9). The holistic approach of this project has a magnificent way of shedding light on the uniqueness of the Zulu speaking community whilst including them into the rest of the country and the rest of the world.

Continuing in the theme of inclusion, in the Eastern Cape a mobile citizen journalism project is run in conjunction with the local newspaper and is called Indaba Ziyafika which translates as the news is coming (Sarrazin, 2011:30). The headlines of the paper are sent to local members of the community via text messages, while trained members of the community send in pictures and short stories via the same medium. The primary aim of the project is to give the community a voice, allowing them to express and draw attention to pertinent issues which affect them on a daily basis in the hopes of improving civic involvement (The News is coming Online, 2010). The programme is currently being run in Grahamstown and is said to show that even when there is access to mobile technology, the citizens are educated about their rights as citizens as well as how to use the technology and they are even paid for participation, it can still not be sufficient to mobilize the people to partake in citizen journalism (Berger, 2011:722). Despite the intentions and facilities of the project, the hardest part remains getting the community to be enthusiastic about getting involved. That being said, it's not necessary for all citizens to participate in order to have an effect. A few participants representing the views of many may go a long way in broadening the public sphere.

Moving on to the Western Cape, an anti-eviction campaign has also appropriated the mobile phone for their activist purposes. The mobile phone has helped them by decreasing the cost of keeping closer contact with their clients especially because they do not make use of an office (Chuimbu, 2012). It is important to note that this mobile activity has not substituted older protest actions and means of communication, but has rather reinforced unity amongst its members (2012:200). There is thus a fusion of both new and old means and methods wherein which old practices are still necessary, but are enhanced and amplified by mobile technology.

Nationally, mobile activism has also occurred in South Africa. There have been instances of the ruling party using mobile phones for political activism. The national elections of 2009 saw political parties employing social media strategies as part of their campaigns when they should rather have invested in communication through mobile platforms (Duncan, 2009). However, evidence has been found

that mobile internet platforms such as Mig33, and SMS were used to spread rumours about the opposition party, engage in debate and also to disseminate election information while mobile leader MXit did not allow formal political activity on its platform (Walton & Donner, 2009).

While much of the writing speaks to the empowerment of organizations and citizens, a specific South African example exists which illustrates how the mobile phone was used by an elite member of society for his own ends. President Jacob Zuma was fired by now ex-President Thabo Mbeki following the former's corruption charges, Zuma gathered funds through the public who could SMS his name to a certain number that would enable the user to donate R5 to his Friends of Jacob Zuma campaign (Mhlambi, 2012:133-135). Furthermore, many supporters shared autographed pictures and songs (such as Zuma's signature song Umshini Wam which translates as My Machine Gun) which they had either received via Bluetooth or downloaded from a mobile content provider. Mhlambi (2012) suggests that Zuma's poor relations with mainstream media led him to use new media to get his own point across.

These examples of mobile and political communication provide little information about the way in which ordinary South African citizens are entering into political debates through their mobile phones. Accessing Facebook and Mxit are said to be the most important uses of mobile phones for South Africans (Donner & Shikoh, 2009). The following section of this chapter investigates how Facebook has been used for political communication internationally in order to contextualise the ways in which the site is used here in South Africa.

## **Facebook and Political Communication**

Donath and boyd (2004) conducted a study on the uses of Facebook soon after the social media site took off, and discovered that the primary purpose of engagement with the site was for impression management amongst acquaintances (boyd, 2008; boyd & Ellison, 2008; Morris & Baumgartner, 2009). However, there have been times when the connectivity enabled by the site has facilitated political action. In some cases increased Facebook usage was correlated with increased political action by university students (Kee et al, 2008). It could be that the civic action in fact occurred because of impression management by young people to whom it might look cool to be involved in fighting for a cause. Alternatively, Facebook might have been used by some already established movements to connect with people to reach out and inform people about a cause. This fusion of established movements and Facebook, indicates the facilitative role that Facebook can play in raising awareness (Westling, 2007). That being said, one must be cautious not to veer into technological determinist territory. For this reason the political context provides the main motivation for political

action, while social media functions as a critical element in dissemination and in so doing accelerating the action taken (Wolfsfeld et al., 2012).

Social media began to play an important role in political campaigning during the Howard Dean campaign in the United States in 2004, which introduced the use of a Web site, blog, fundraising tools, and online meet-up tools, The influence of Facebook in particular was consolidated in in Barack Obama's presidential campaign of 2008 where it played a key role (Zhang et al., 2010). Hyperlink analyses on the three main United States presidential candidate's Facebook profiles provided evidence of their profiles being used as multi-modal public spheres. However, in line with low participation rates in user-generated content sites, this kind of participation only came from 9,5% of their fans and group members.

The growing importance of social media for politics is not just an American phenomenon. In the Netherlands it was found that the politicians who received more votes, were the ones who used their Facebook profiles more often and effectively (Effing et al, 2011). The authors who are partial to this argument believe that these politicians capitalized on using the site to hear from their supporters and used the information in their campaign strategies. Similarly, in Britain it was found that constituents shared information on their personal profiles which was valuable to the sharpening of the campaigns of representatives (Wiles & Reeves, 2009). Representatives would then hone their campaigns accordingly in order to guarantee the receptiveness of the electorate to vote for them. In countries where the internet is accessible to most, if not all citizens, these tools present powerful possibilities

As Facebook has been praised for empowering so it has also been blamed for weakening true activism. "Slacktivism" refers to the reduction of real activism, to the action of simply clicking a link, often on social media sites such as Facebook, which signs an online petition, or allows the user to donate money to a cause (Morozov, 2011). Christensen (2011) claims that Morozov's view is cynical because online activism does not necessary prevent offline action. The general thread through this literature has been that the awareness raised through social media can, under certain circumstances, provide the necessary stimulus to trigger offline action. This has been used to explain the scale of the Egyptian Revolution (Tufecki & Wilson, 2012). In a survey, a quarter of survey respondents who had participated in protests on Tahrir Square indicated that they first heard about the protests through Facebook, and continued to share the information through the same medium and also Twitter (2012:374).

The most recent publication about Facebook as a public sphere conceptualizes the space as a contested area, vied for by the public, government and private corporations who all want to be in control of the new communicative space (Djick, 2012). This struggle between these three sectors alludes to the power dynamic of the site and, perhaps more importantly, to the fact that the power dynamic amongst these sectors is not predetermined, as it is offline. This insinuates that there is an equalizing feature of the social media site, which provides another possible explanation as to why the site has been used effectively by both public and government. Research about Facebook on the African continent is limited to an extremely insightful study in Zambia conducted during their elections in September 2011, Facebook was used to gain access to political information in the private spaces of the home, when the private spaces outside in the streets were unsafe (Willem, 2012). This speaks to the empirical space that Facebook creates, which is detached from but used to discuss reality.

Research about Facebook in South Africa is limited to a study on the viability of using the social media site for academic means (Bosch, 2009) as well as how young females use the site to express their sexuality (Bosch, 2011). No study on the use of Facebook for political means in South Africa has been published yet. The lack of this kind of literature and the findings of previous literature shedding light on the importance of Facebook on mobile phones, and the use of mobile phones for political communication by the governing elites provides the rationale for this study. This study aims to fill the gap by investigating how Facebook mobile is being used by ordinary citizens for political communication or more specifically, for participation in online public spheres.

## **Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework**

In this chapter the theory of the public sphere is introduced. The expansion and application of this theory in the online environment is subsequently investigated along with its strengths and weaknesses. Using this information as a foundation, public spheres in Africa and South Africa are explored in order to create the context in which this theory is applied. Lastly, online public sphere

criteria are evaluated and the most appropriate one is selected as discussed in terms of its application in this study.

## The Public Sphere

The public sphere is a concept initially introduced by Jürgen Habermas (1974), who asserted that “citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion- that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions- about matters of general interest” (1974:49). Habermas originally idealised one central public sphere which he asserted was best for strengthening and maintaining democracy (1989). The public sphere is said to have four foundational factors (Tomaselli & Teer- Tomaselli, 2009)

1. The space is to be free from influence by the state or the Church.
2. Debate is to be open to *all*. Women and slaves were not allowed to enter. So in reality the public sphere consisted of rich men who had the time to sit around and debate.
3. The public sphere was to be free from influence by the market, which could represent the views of a few individuals only.
4. The sphere and the nature of the discussions were to meet the standards of rationality and contribute to reason. (Tomaselli & Tomaselli, 2009:186).

Therefore, the public sphere was a space where members of society could congregate, free from all things except information and public opinion.

Fraser (1992) in a critique of this emphasized that in a society where equality is not prevalent, one huge public sphere would not do much to strengthen democracy. She suggested that multiple publics, or subaltern publics, would allow less powerful or subjugated citizens to speak more freely so as to avoid the intimidation of more powerful citizens present in a central public sphere. A few years later Keane (2000) introduced the notion of 3 new types of publics called the micro, meso, and macro-publics each of which is exponentially bigger than the preceding type. Even though it is his idea of the macro-sphere which is enabled by the power of the internet, of more relevance to this discussion on Facebook groups is his idea of Micro-public spheres, which can be anything from a few, up to thousands of citizens and pertain to citizens at a local level discussing political issues most pertinent to their daily lives (2000:8-12). This view of the public sphere resembles Habermas' idea and is also most relevant and applicable to the study at hand.

## **Online public spheres**

The current day mainstream public spheres have also left much to be desired by the broader public.

New political communication strategies make use of marketing models such as market segmentation, which result in politicians campaigning only to those who they are likely to persuade (Gandy, 2001:147). This has resulted in the rest of society being marginalized and almost excluded from both being heard by politicians and also being spoken to. This means that there is a void in political communication. There are people who are ignored by those in power and who need their voices to be heard.

Some authors started to look to the internet as the appropriate place for people to make their voices heard and to air their grievances. Sparks (2001) introduced 6 factors which make the internet and Computer Mediated Communication a hopeful collaboration:

1. The conventions of the internet are known to all as a gesture of transparency.
2. Its structure encourages interaction.
3. It did away with the need for physical space.
4. Citizens can be free from the status quo and social standing by the opportunity to engage anonymously.
5. The ease with which knowledge can be shared and exchanged is a hallmark of the rationality required during the Enlightenment era.
6. All users can search and access information with ease.

These factors speak to the potential which the internet has in creating the perfect space for online political debates to occur. There is the risk that a lack of internet access to all means that the elites are expected to dominate the online environment and shape it to their interests as they have done with mainstream media (Spark, 2001:87). This view is echoed by Slater (2001:118) who predicted that the liberal free market which drives the global economy would also drive the users who have a strong consumerist nature, and will be driven by that urge, instead of seeking out spaces for online debates

Schneider (1997) in a study on Usenet newsgroups which discussed topics regarding abortion, found that online discussion forums can function as the informal public spheres as introduced by Habermas (1996). The formal public occurs when there are consequences of the deliberation in the form of

laws or policies which have the possibility of being implemented, whereas the informal public sphere has fewer real world consequences besides the formulation of public opinion (Schneider, 1997:40-41). Freelon (2010) in a review of online political deliberation models argued that all previous research remains shallow in its attempts to liken modern day and online public spheres to the ideal introduced by Habermas. The author insists that the criteria created by Habermas which consists of three main aspects, including: arguments judged by their rationality instead of the speaker, discussion of issues pertaining to the daily lives of those involved in the deliberation and free access to all (2010:3) is the main focus of new models, and not enough attention is being paid to the type of political discussions that occur in these online forums.

This kind of thinking could be considered pre-emptive. The first question to be answered is whether a specific site is an online public sphere before answering questions regarding the type of political debates. In order to get an answer to that question, it is first necessary to review different criteria for determining whether a site qualifies as an online public sphere.

One cannot doubt that freedom was imperative to the ideal public sphere. Habermas emphasized that participants were to have the freedom to discuss whatever they wanted, feel free to say what they want and be free to join in the discussion in the first place. For this reason, some argue that an online environment liberates participants from any kind of intimidation which may arise in a face-to-face set up (Pappacharissi, 2004). However there are those who maintain that a face-to-face situation enables a natural flow of conversation necessary for deliberation and that this creates the environment which increases the chances of reaching a consensus (Gastil, 2000). Habermas defines the public sphere as “a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed” (1974:49). From this we can deduce that the purpose of the public sphere was to formulate opinions, not to reach a consensus.

## **Limitations of the online sphere**

A major limitation of the online sphere includes the fractured nature of the internet. This sees the occurrence of smaller, issue specific debates instead of larger discussions with more participants and a wider variety of issues (Polat, 2005). It is for this reason that some dispute the viability of a global public sphere, which authors such as Keane (2000) thought possible due to the capacity of the internet. Vaidhynathan (2011) disputes the viability of a global public sphere because of the lack of shared issues and other factors, when compared to the national public sphere which Habermas envisioned.

Another obstacle is created when investigating the structure of Google, one of the world's most popular search engines. All the search results they yield vary according to the geographical location of the user. This is because Google uses the language and other local information to act as a filter which allows it to yield the results most likely to be relevant to the user (Vaidhyanathan, 2011:137). This means that the search experience is different for all users depending on their national location. Your local and national borders are almost rebuilt when using Google. Another effect could be that the desirability of a global sphere might side-line and subdue the differences and complexities of communities for the sake of having a unitary space and a single means of communication (Dahlgren, 2001). While the internet has the capacity to create a global public sphere, for those who foremost have the interest and the desire for political debates online it is better suited to creating counter-publics which can act as an extension to the single prevailing public (2001:51-52).

Evidence of this is seen in Arab countries, where more citizens have access to the internet when compared to the rest of Africa. With a history and a modern day reality of state intervention in every aspect of citizen's lives through their religious government, many Muslims have approached the internet created spheres as spaces where they can re-negotiate their identities as Muslims and also express dissent about their governments (Eickelman & Anderson, 2003). The issue around access is quite different in the Arab world. In times before the internet it was mainly the elites who had access to theatre, which was the only area where dissent was expressed. It is through new media that the middle class has now too gained access to this counter-sphere where they enjoy freedom of speech that their government does not allow in the offline environment (Eickelman & Andeson, 2003:4). Due to the national economies reliance on the internet the government is between a rock and a hard place, being put in the position where they cannot simply shut down the internet in their countries (2003:3). The case of the Arab world provides two of the catalysts for online spheres to be created and used. The first is access, and the second is an offline environment which creates the need for citizens to express themselves online. In their case, it is the lack of freedom of speech which appears to have driven citizens online.

This kind of arrangement could also perhaps decrease the perceived negative effects of being behind the screen, which have come to include the heightening of rudeness amongst participants and extremist views (Dahlgreen, 2005: 152). It is not to say the internet is to be blamed for these adverse effects, but that it gives people the opportunity to express harmful and unpopular views without having to deal with real-world consequences.

All these speculations and opinions by these authors might be falsified when investigating how the public sphere has been affected by the internet in other regions of the world. The following sections investigate publics in Africa and South Africa specifically.

## **Public sphere in Africa**

Moyo (2009) attributes the growth of internet use in Zimbabwe in part, to the despotic government and the lack of traditional media freedom in the country (2009:60). Some of the citizens, and especially expatriates, have taken to the online environment to share news, debate politics and report human rights abuses in the country in a review of three websites by the author. Frere and Kiyindou (2009) write that similar trends have occurred in Francophone Africa but there are many obstacles to entry in the online environment which include infrastructure and access to the internet, whilst low levels of education and literacy limit the type of activity that occurs online. Amidst fears of the cultural homogenization threatening African cultures through the internet, there is the belief that online protocols do not mix with traditional African customs and social relations (2009: 81). This is an obstacle which is perhaps unique to parts of Africa where social customs dominate all spheres of daily living, of which there is no regulation online.

In the Middle East and North African areas, which are largely Muslim, the online sphere is being used by women to gain access to the traditional public sphere (Skalli, 2006). Women in these areas have been excluded from the public sphere for decades due to the religious belief held in these countries. The same barriers to entry of the online sphere do exist in these countries, and it is mostly educated middle class Muslim women who are taking to the online environment. Activists also use these spaces to learn more about freedoms enjoyed by women in other regions and initiate discussions about their own desires and visions for their own freedom in the future (2006: 50-52). Again this is an example of online escapism. It is due to their offline situation that they use the opportunities created by the internet. This appears to be a golden thread to many of the developing countries and their engagement in online public spheres.

An ethnographic investigation of online chat sites which have been created for those Africans who have immigrated to countries abroad has also been done (Tettey, 2009). Countries which are represented in these findings are South Africa, Nigeria, and Ghana. According to Tettey (2009) their particular use of the sites exceeds the public sphere model introduced by Habermas, and is not unique to Africa (2009:151). His findings reflect how expatriates use these sites to form counter-publics by discussing alternative narratives of history and analyse current events in ways which differ from those in their home countries (2009:156). These counter public spaces are used to connect

them to their homelands yet simultaneously they enjoy the distance by freely expressing those ideas which are often not welcomed, nor openly spoken about in their countries. This could be because these participants also look at their countries from the outside in, by physically being outside of their borders. Living in other countries and seeing how they are governed could also make them more critical of the way their own countries are being run.

Remaining in the domain of the diasporas, an internet site by the name of Dehai, has been used by Eritreans in the diaspora and enables them to go beyond just envisioning the nation they are from, but actually forming part of it (Bernal, 2005). Theirs is an example of online public and counter public spheres allowing them to transcend physical distance and feel like they are a part of the Eritrea nation. The fact that it is expatriates who use the site might speak to the kind, or class of the citizen who is using the site. These are often well educated citizens who enjoy a relatively comfortable standard of living. Therefore it could be that these are the upper middle and even elite classes of Eritrea who have seen this site as an opportunity, and are using the internet as a means to create and form part of a public or counter public sphere.

Staying the Horn of Africa, interesting fusions of new and old media with online and offline traditional spheres are taking place. Gagliardone and Stremlau (2012) write about how it has become common practice for entire blog posts or messages from online forums to be printed in newspapers (2012: 16-18). In this way issues of access are slightly overcome, as the discussions that occur online do make their way to those who are not connected to the internet. The internet therefore acts as a space to share new ideas, and these are then picked up and disseminated to the rest of the citizens. This is an ironic twist in that the internet has been praised for its ability to disseminate information, yet these countries still have a major reliance on traditional media for the spread of information.

More examples of fusions between new and old media exist across Africa. Tomaselli & Teer-Tomaselli (2009) put forth the argument that the show *Big Brother Africa*, which is a reality show where one representative from 12 African countries are locked in a house for up to three months , can and has functioned on all three levels of Keane's public sphere in Africa. The authors state that even though the kind of content has been labelled as immoral and cheap, the show initiated conversations about African values and what it means to be a true African (2009:196). While the authors negate the democratic nature of discussions in and around the house, one could argue that this is not the case because housemates often do discuss socio-political issues through the weekly tasks that they are given. Their online presence is also impressive, with real time responses from the

viewers on social media sites like Twitter and Facebook being broadcast on the television 24/7 and especially during their weekly results shows.

Where some have expressed cyber utopian ideas about the potential which the internet hold for materializing previous visions and calls for Pan- Africanism, Wasserman (2005) has rebutted that access to communication technology is the biggest obstacle to the realization of the Pan-African dream. Another obstacle is acknowledging that the spreading of the internet is part of the bigger process of globalization. This means that while the internet might bring hope for the dissemination of African identities and local cultures, it will definitely bring international influences as well. Hall (1999) went as far as to call this aspect “virtual colonization”. Therefore, the internet is met with a challenge, and brings both opportunity as well as a threat to local culture.

Another example is the fusion of music and social media. Ogola et al (2009) report on how local artists in Nigeria, Kenya and Cote d’ Ivoire create music about politics and nationality and often use new media to disseminate their latest singles since they do not enjoy the support of mainstream media in their respective countries. This lack of support is grounded in the lack of traditional cultural elements in the music but also because of the lyrical content which also tends to be counter to the mainstream public. As many of the genres these artists create are influenced by American Hip Hop music, the fusion of the international and the national within their music allows for development of identity renegotiation especially amongst the youth (2009: 204).

This trend of music acting as a counter sphere has also had its affects in South Africa. Haupt (2006) contributed that many local urban hip hop groups in the Western Cape during South Africa’s transition from Apartheid during the 1990s functioned as counter-publics for South African youths. These groups would rap about their mistrust and disillusionment with the new South Africa during a time when the media was preoccupied with being an instrument of nationalism. The author also asserts that while many of these youths were deprived of good schooling due to the poor education system, the songs that these artists produced initiated critical thinking amongst their audience members, enabling them to question and express their continued discontent (Haupt, 2006: 88).

We now look at the rest of the public sphere in South Africa in order to create the context wherein which the current study takes place.

## **South Africa and Public Sphere**

One of the factors which contributed to the end of Apartheid was one of the world’s greatest counter publics ever which spanned across four decades (Thorn, 2007). The majority of South

Africans who were mainly those who were oppressed came from a culture of resistance to the dominant order. They came from an era when counter publics were very active in their daily lives. After the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which set the tone of forgiveness and peace, it became out of place to outwardly express any opinions which were out of line.

In a situation where many newspapers were used to forward the ideas of the ruling Nationalist government at the time, suddenly these papers were expected to change their tone and entire image in some cases. One such example was Die Burger, which according to Wasserman & Botma (2008) transitioned from delivering on political demands from the Apartheid government, to delivering on market demands as it now had to function in an entirely new national and well as global economy.

The Broadcasting Act of 1999 states that the media is to play a role in nation building and protect the country's multi-culturalism. South Africa has been acknowledged as a country which is still trying to heal from the deep wounds inflicted during Apartheid, with the different races in South Africa all reacting to the idea of being South African first. Tensions are still bubbling under the surface and racial segregation still continues, both as a result of the shift from race to class in the stratification of a highly unequal society. Furthermore, the inherited spatial distribution of people according to race, as shaped by Apartheid, continues to separate people of different races from others. An online environment is perhaps one of the few environments where South Africans of different races can come together to discuss various relevant issues.

One of the online news sites called News24 has provided discussion threads beneath news articles and editorials. Many South African internet users are familiar, and some disgusted by the prevalence of racism in many of the comments on the different threads (News24, 2012c). Those comments which users see have made it through moderation indicating that there are worse comments which are deleted and not published on the site. This is one example of some South African internet users using the "safe space" opportunity created by an online environment to express their racist notions. There is the possibility that this occurs because there is no other environment where South Africans are able to discuss the many identity related issues they all battle with on a daily basis.

The important question is whether we find evidence of an online public sphere in South Africa. Bosch (2009), using the online sphere criteria by Poor (2005), found that two blog platforms linked to South Africa's online news sites do in fact provide evidence of online sphere activities happening in the comment threads amongst journalists who blog and the readers of these articles. She adds that the democratic deliberation that does occur is weak which means that the democratic potential

is not being reached amongst the few who do use the internet for deliberation purposes (2009:272). Other than this publication, published articles about the South African online public sphere are scarce.

## **Online public sphere criteria**

There are three online sphere criteria which have come to be the most popular. The first one consists of 6 criteria which focus on the sincerity, intentions and personal reflections of the participants (Dahlberg, 2001). Those aspects of the criteria are very difficult to measure and even more challenging to quantify. This framework is therefore better suited to a qualitative study, and not appropriate for a content analysis at all. The second set of criteria which was considered focussed on social networks as a mediated-public sphere and emphasized the importance of the architecture of the site wherein the deliberation occurs (boyd, 2007). In this framework, attention is paid to whether the conversation thread is available after the debate, and whether it had an audience besides those who participated (boyd, 2007). The latter framework was thought to be unsuitable for the purpose of this study which is more concerned with the content of the deliberation, as well as the technology used to contribute it, rather than the circumstances shaping participation the debate.

Etzioni (2004) writes that virtual online communities, which are necessary for online publics, cannot exist unless the participants provide full disclosure about their identities in order to build trust within the community. Then, evaluating the potential for online communities to be democratic the author provides four characteristics or aims that are a requirement for groups to meet (2004:93-97). The first two are information sharing and e-voting, which the author contends are both easy to fulfil online. The last two requirements, which are deliberation and representation, are not as feasible. He argues that true deliberation occurs in small groups of people who are familiar with each other and therefore know each other's identities. Deliberation which happens amongst individuals who are anonymous will therefore lack any worth. Considering the importance of freedom in the public sphere, it could happen that individuals feel liberated by the fact that they are not intimately known by those they are debating with. Many people know that political discussions are often avoided by people who are familiar with each other, such as family, because of how heated the discussions can become. Also, because of the personal nature of those relationships, the disagreements can drag on and affect other non-political areas of their relationships.

The criteria that has been selected application in this study has a stronger focus on the content of the debate in that it specifically mentions that the debate is to be political in nature (Poor,2005).

This, along with its emphasis on equality amongst participants, as echoed in Habermas' initial concept, qualified its use for this study. The criteria are as follows:

1. Debate and dialogue are to occur.
2. New people are to enter the dialogue who did not enjoy the privilege or leisure of inclusion before.
3. The dialogue is to concern political matters.
4. The identities of the people sharing ideas should not influence the reception of the ideas.

These criteria will be applied to the selected Facebook group (New Political Forum) and will be used for qualitative analysis of the data to be collected.

## **Chapter 4: Methodology-Content Analysis**

This chapter firstly aims to present the historical foundations and traditional principles of content analysis. The methodology has been used for studies on the internet since the early 1990s seeing the development of a sub-category called web-based content analysis. By reviewing the application of the methodology in these studies and also through introducing this research design, it is hoped that more light is shed on the inherent challenges and contradictions that arise when applying content analysis to studies of the web. The chapter concludes with information with a discussion of ethics.

### **Historical Overview of Content Analysis**

As defined by Wimmer and Domnick (2004) content analysis is a quantitative method used to study media. The method strives to be impartial, and to address questions about large collections of media texts. Ideally, content analysis should aim to produce similar results if the same method was employed by a different researcher (2006:150-151). Some of the limitations are that the results of the method are often heavily affected by events during the time of study, and findings of media studies are not necessarily representative of what transpires in reality (Prinsloo, 1996) and that content analysis does not tell us anything about how people in fact interpret and use media in their everyday lives. Nonetheless this method was chosen for the proposed study because of the need to generalize and characterize, quantitatively a relatively large sample of online discourse (Deacon et al., 1999; Zhang & Wildermuth, 2009). In particular, the study needs to compare the frequency of posts and comments originating from mobile phones as opposed to those posted to the New Political Forum Facebook group from desktop. Content analysis is the proposed method for quantitative studies.

Content analysis as a methodology originated from a study which aimed to track the development of journalism and its relationship with advertising over time, in order to draw inferences about the values of society (Weber, 1924:10). Despite the moral agenda of the study, it was the understanding that quantitative research of such a nature could inform qualitative understandings of the social order. An example of this is one of the first content analysis ever done, by Matthews (1910), who investigated a daily newspaper in New York for three months and coded all 13 330 the articles into 177 categories according to the topic they covered. A second level of coding took place when the content was coded according to whether it was ‘unpleasant’, ‘depressing’, ‘insignificant’ or ‘meaningful’ (1910:13). The author undertook this study to see whether print media was fulfilling its objective to educate society. His results showed that most of the content in the newspaper was business-related and of an unpleasant nature. He then used this to support his argument that

society is obsessed with money and that this obsession lies at the source of society's moral degradation, which was evident in the newspaper content.

Another study of this nature was completed two years later by Teney (1912) who studied the news section of 17 New York dailies for four different cultural sects in society. In doing this he could measure (per inch) and quantify the amount of space and attention given to each news category by each group (English, German, Yiddish and Italian) and compare the media consumption of each cultural group to another (1912: 17). Both these studies did not follow content analysis rules which aim to encourage objectivity as the method was not yet formalized, but these examples reflected the need to use a quantitative method to draw (normative) qualitative inferences about society.

Research done during the 1950s by Dovring (1954) found that content analysis actually has its roots as far back as 1743. The Orthodox State Church in Sweden ordered an investigation of a collection of 90 hymns called Songs of Zion (1954:4). They believed that the hymns were adversely affecting society because they spread Moravian doctrine. The latter was protestant in nature and therefore in contempt of the official doctrine prescribed by the state. When some members of society started to break the law by having private prayer meetings and even using Moravian hymns and doctrine in their sermons, the state ordered the content of these hymns to be investigated (Dovring, 1954: 6). The state used the results of the study to question the salvation preached by the Moravians and finally claimed that it was in fact no salvation at all. This is a very interesting example of the belief that content had the power to change the behaviour of society, and how the state attempted to undo those changes by using the purported beliefs embedded in the hymns.

All four of these examples illustrate early beliefs that there is a direct relationship between the media content which society consumes and the values of that society. A more important thread that runs through this is the belief that that relationship can be captured and quantified through content analysis, which can reveal the power dynamics within that relationship. Initial content analysis then went on to investigate the relationship between content and individuals. A study of personal letters from a woman called Jenny was done to see whether personality traits could be deduced from her style of writing (Alport, 1965). The methodology used for this study was better developed because it was published shortly after the time that content analysis had begun to develop as a systematic research methodology. The next section looks at the most seminal articles regarding this development and introduces the rules for the application of the methodology.

## **Traditional content analysis**

Reading through the main characteristics of content analysis by different authors, the emphasis on quantitative expression becomes apparent even in the models they use to describe this method. A secondary emphasis on meticulousness also shines through in the systematic manner authors have come to describe it as a method. For instance, there are three characteristics which have been ascribed to content analysis: Impartiality, accuracy and generalizations (Pool et al, 1955:25-26). The first, impartiality, is the most important and it is judged on the feasibility of other researchers being able to replicate the study for further research. Accuracy relates to the quantitative expression of the findings, and can be extended to the process of data collection and processing. Lastly, generalization refers to the emphasis that is placed on sampling, for the purpose of being able to reveal the most general reflection of the researched situation. For this reason, if the results of a research study are specific to a certain time, this prevents the findings being used to make deductions about everyday situations.

Three suppositions can be made about content analysis (Berelson, 1952: 18-20). The first is the belief that there is a relationship between the actual method and its objectives and its outcomes. This means that there is the belief that content analysis will be the most appropriate method that answers the research question at hand. Secondly, the researcher at work believes that the coding which s/he applies to the data corresponds with the intentions of the communicator, and the understanding of the audience. This means that there is a consensus between the intended and received message, and that the researcher understands the consensus. Understandably, this consensus is challenging to ascertain. Lastly, the method's foundation is built on the belief that there is meaning in the quantitative expression of the data. This again speaks to the early calls for this methodology. The emphasis placed on the shared understanding of meaning echoes earlier beliefs in the reciprocated reflection shared by media and society. More importantly, it also accentuates the quantitative expression of information that can add more to a qualitative understanding.

Holsti (1969) developed a system of research designs for content analysis which allowed various study topics to be classified according to 3 questions which are related to their respective purposes. They are as follows (Holsti, 1969: 20-21):

1. In order to make deductions about specifics features of the data.
2. In order to reveal the reasons for the production of the data.
3. In order to determine the effects of the data on an audience.

These purposes are allotted to specific research designs which are aimed at answering specific research questions. It is the first classification which indicates the aims of this project. This type of study investigates the message in order to answer questions regarding the relation of the origin and the traits of the message. In this study, that is applied in asking whether there is a difference (traits) in the posts and comments (messages) when comparing those sent from mobile phones or other sources.

The strengths of this method include the fact that content analysis works in direct contact with the actual data as a body of communication (Weber, 1990:10). For example, if a study focuses on the newspaper, the researcher would work directly with the content of the newspaper, by working with the articles, advertisements or information about the content placed in the newspaper. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly according to Weber(1990), is that other research methods are more intrusive on the communicator and audience in that the members are aware of the research taking place. With a content analysis these parties are less aware of their contributions being researched, when compared to surveys or even interviews. However, this has ethical implications and it is for this reason that participants in a content analysis study have to be made aware of the study taking place.

Perhaps the above-mentioned provides an explanation for this method's popularity. Cooper et al (1994), in a study of prestigious journals and their publications during 1965 until 1989 found that almost 58% of the articles used quantitative methods during the entire period. Of these, 20% were content analyses. Where the continued use of this methodology is important, it is the application (and sometimes adaptation) of the method which is more intriguing. One content analysis of all publications that used content analyses as a methodology that have been published in one journal in the last 25 years indicates that these studies have increasingly reported on their reliability but that there has been a dramatic decline in the use of theories and samples which are representative (Riffe and Freitag: 1997). The lack of theoretical grounding and the increase of convenience/unrepresentative sampling have been blamed for the stagnation of the methodology (1997:522).

These and other short-comings become more prevalent when applying content analysis to studies of the web. In the following section a selection of studies which are of a similar nature to the current study will be reviewed. This will accentuate the difficulties that are faced when applying this methodology to an online environment.

## **Web-based Content Analysis**

The internet presents unique challenges to the application of content analysis as a research methodology (Weare & Lin, 2000). The absolute enormity of the internet which involves capturing copious amounts of data in order to attempt to depict even a basic representation of all the activity is one of the main challenges. By making an example of the obligation politicians now have to include internet and social media in their political communication, many citizens now have more power in the form of agenda setting and are also given more of a platform (with audiences) which results in a shift in traditional media landscape (Weare & Lin, 2000:273). This adapted landscape often warrants adapted research methods in order to study them accurately.

In a review of 19 studies that used content analysis in researching computer mediated communication, all of them on the topic of online discussion for educational purposes, approximately half of the studies performed reliability tests, almost all of the studies used descriptive research designs and their respective units of analysis varied from sentences to meanings (Rourke et al,2000: 8-19).In an overview of 561 studies done about the internet during 1996 and 2000, it was found that only 39 (7%) used content analysis as a main methodology (Kim & Weaver, 2002:528). These results depict a general trend of most studies about the internet being (72%) being qualitative in nature (Kim & Weaver, 2000:529). This could be an indication of the sense of difficulty surrounding the application of this method as a methodology.

Another review of 19 web based content analysis studies found that the traditional method was not applied whole-heartedly, because of the research challenges the web presents which included issues concerning sampling and data capturing to name a few (McMillan: 2000). According to Herring (2010) traditional content analysis should expand to encompass a subsection called Web Content Analysis. She suggests that web based research necessitates a reformed methodology “ that draws on methods from other disciplines to address characteristic features of the web such as hyperlinks and textual exchanges, and that recasts traditional CA (content analysis) notions such as comparable units of analysis, fixed coding schemes, and random sampling to fit the requirements of web research”(2010:11). Therefore the multimodal nature of the web and convergence of different types of media (such as images and text) are not accommodated in the static notions of what would be consistent units and coding frames in traditional content analysis.

The websites of 4 German political parties were investigated during the 2002 elections and analysed for a month (Schweitzer, 2005). These websites were checked four times during that month in order to track any changes in the content (2005: 334). Considering that the month chosen was the last

before the election, the study could perhaps have checked the sites more frequently. The last month before election is the most important in a campaign and this could result in an increase of the pace online. The findings in this study relate to the lack of interactivity between the party sites and their uses, citing no areas for discussion or feedback from the visitors to the site. This indicates that there is an interest in what the people's reactions to the campaigns are. Similarly, Hoffman (2006) compared the content of newspapers to their online news sites and found that there was no real difference in their content. The author did make a call for the research of the discussion areas of the site, insisting that there content will be very different (2006: 68). Content analysis has been popular when it comes to analysing blogs (Herring et al, 2006; Papacharissi, 2004; Scott, 2007; Meraz, 2007; Sundar et al, 2007). However, the following is a review of methodologies where content analysis was applied to political forums and social media sites. This section will explore how content analysis has been adapted to research the online environment.

## **Review of methodologies**

Studying three different computer networks for three of the presidential candidates during the 1992 United States presidential elections, Scott et al (1996) ask what the public uses the chat areas for. Their sample was created by randomly selecting 5 days for three different months, and then randomly selecting the number of posts they would study for each of those days (1996:141). They discern between 17 different kinds of posts which informed their coding frame and found that contributions by the users of the site were mostly for the purpose of sharing their opinions, followed by sharing personal stories and lastly sharing information (1996:142- 144). The authors did not mention what the numerical value of the universe was, but they did perform reliability tests and also statistical significance tests on almost all their findings. A very interesting element of this study is the unit of analysis. Instead of using the post or message as a single unit, they allow for multiple statements to be coded in each message. Even though this might become overwhelming due to the multitude of (perhaps disorganized) data, it brings to the fore the important fact that each message might have multiple meanings.

A seminal study in online political communication was contributed by Hill and Hughes (1997). They researched an online platform of political forums called USENET for 10 weeks. By randomly selecting 22 forums they had a sample of 1013 threads which contained a total of 5611 messages (Hill & Hughes, 1997: 8). Their study remains one of the first where the unit of analysis was the discussion in its entirety. This means that they studied both the initial post as well as the responses, because studying these two types of messages together provided the necessary context for analysis. Even though their primary research question addressed the issue of whether the user who contributed

the post maintained their political ideological positions throughout the discussions, they did have some other interesting levels of coding which they implemented. In addition to categorising some posts as advertisement of events, inquiries, recruitment and flaming, they characterised whether a post was in fact a debate, by seeking evidence of participants expressing different opinions (Hill & Hughes, 1997:8). These categories speak to the belief that political forums might not concern political matters all the time. They also acknowledged that even when the discussions are political, they might not be debates. There are occasions when the focus is political, but it is an incidence of flaming or recruitment. These codes will also be adapted and applied in the current research project.

Again on USENET, and in a bid to determine whether online political debates could contribute to democracy, Papacharissi (2004) performed a content analysis to capture frequency of incivility and impoliteness in the online environment. Her belief was that high occurrences of both these negative elements would impede the positive contribution that sites like USENET could make towards democracy. A sample of 10 forums was randomly selected, from which two threads were randomly selected per forum (Papacharissi, 2004: 271). Again, the entire thread was the unit of analysis with the rationale that a thread is evidence of a discussion. This is by the logic that another party has responded to the initial message. In this case, sampled threads were rejected and replaced by the researcher if they did not attract many responses (2004:271-2). Her rationale was that longer discussions were more likely to have threads which display rudeness amongst users .When considering the content analysis claim to being systematic and replicable, this action is problematic. Even though the alternative thread was randomly selected, each unit is meant to have the same chance of being selected as the next. Here the author has expressed the selection criteria and then gone on to reject some results on no grounds except her own judgement. This brings the findings into disrepute when considering the emphasis content analysis places on the attempt to be objective. One coding frame which was used in this study will also be borrowed and adapted for this study. Papacharissi counted the amount of words in order to record the size of the posts. While the relevance of this practice for the study by Papacharissi is unclear, in this case it will be used in order to compare the size of mobile application contributions to other contributions.

Himelboim (2010) also investigated Usenet in order to measure the effects of the size of a group and the patterns of discussions. Their sample is quite extensive and this results in their methodology being quite complicated. Content analysis is one method that they employed to answer one of 5 research questions, which aims to display how messages that received many responses differ from those that did not. Their sample for this segment of the study includes posts which received the most responses for a six month period, in 15 groups and then coded according to the type of news

source they were discussing (online news or blogs etc.) (2010:13). The data that they used for this was from a previous study. They do not mention the exact number of the sample. They then captured and coded 375 messages which received few responses, were randomly selected and coded according to whether they shared opinions or information, with the information again being coded according to its source (2010:14). They then compared these two sets of data in order to study how they differed and why some messages attract more responses than others. The author does not indicate what the size of the first sample is, or when exactly the data was captured. Findings reported that the bigger the group is, the more hierarchical the discussion patterns will become. Smaller groups will have smaller discussions, resulting in more equality amongst the members.

A key difficulty in applying content analysis to the web relates to the issue of sample size. None of the previous studies provided any rationale for their sample sizes. Stempel suggested that using a sample so as to produce findings which could be generalized might have to be done away with when applied to the internet (2000: 545). He asks how we could generalize about something that is growing exponentially on a daily basis. He wrote this more than a decade ago and still we are yet to grasp the magnitude of the internet. An example of this magnitude is displayed in a study done by Patchin & Hinduja (2008). In order to study what information youth share on the social media site, MySpace, they randomly sampled 9282 profiles of the 100 million profiles created, and when they applied their selection criteria to the sample they ended up with 1475 profiles (2008:133-134). These authors provide no rationale for the size of the randomly selected sample. Even though the amount they analysed is impressive it remains questionable whether the findings are generalizable. One could argue that those findings are no more applicable to the rest of the MySpace profile, but they are getting a very good idea of the huge sample they have collected. Sites such as this are constantly being redeveloped. Findings therefore have the tendency to become irrelevant in a short amount of time.

Another content analysis of a social media site was done by Woolley et al (2010) who make the very apt observation that in the United States political party Facebook pages are most likely to contain the same information that is found in mainstream media. It is for this reason they decided to study the groups on Facebook about President Barack Obama and Senator John McCain that were made by Facebook users during the 2008 election. The first sample they selected consisted of the four biggest groups, in terms of membership size, for each candidate. Thereafter, they used a systemized sample of every fourth group when going down the results list of a search for each of the candidates. This resulted in a sample of 278 groups which amounted to 26% of the population (2010:641). This

study had two different units of analysis. The first was the group name and its description and the second unit was the actual page (2010:642). The latter unit was also information about the page, such as the number of members, growth in members and the group profile picture. After they captured all this information they coded it according to whether it shed a positive or negative light on the candidate. They did not investigate the actual content of the group in terms of the member's contributions to discussions. Groups are usually created by one person, but they are used by many. If a sample of 279 groups is used, results could actually only reflect the views of 279 people, whereas investigating the content could uncover what the group members are thinking. This approach might have better suited the research question.

The current study will investigate the content of a specific Facebook group and could be described as joining many of the methodological elements that were present in the reviewed cases above. It is hoped that this research project will reflect the content contributed by the actual users. A secondary aim is to explore and expose the difficulties in applying content analysis to the online environment.

## **Research design**

Traditional content analysis is said to have six stages (Krippendorf, 1980). This research and its execution will now be discussed in the framework of those stages.

### **1. Select data for analysis.**

The data which will be analysed will be the activity on the Facebook group, New Political Forum for a month starting on 3 April 2012. The duration of the study was determined by the stipulated scope of the research assignment .A theoretical framework will be applied to this data in order to see whether this group constitutes an online public sphere. There will be emphasized interest on whether activity is contributed from a mobile application, and whether these contributions differ from contributions from other sources like laptops and desktop computers.

### **2. Compose the research question.**

This project therefore purports to answer the following research question:

*How could we characterise the participation of mobile users as compared to computer users on online public spheres on the Facebook Group, New Political Forum?*

Subsidiary questions will include:

*Does the content of the Facebook Group New Political Forum meet Poor's (2005) criteria for an online public sphere?*

*How many posts are made from mobile applications and how many are made from other sources?*

*How many comments are made from mobile applications and how many are made from other sources?*

*Is there a difference in the way mobile applications are contributing/participating on the Forum when compared to contributions by other sources?*

*Is there a difference in size between the contributions made by mobile applications and those made from other sources?*

### **3. Define the population.**

The population of this study consisted of data that was collected during the month of 3 April 2012 to 3 May 2012. The Facebook Group was visited every second day through a Facebook API browser that allows the user to query and display via graphical user interface any public activity on a Facebook group, or Facebook profile ([www.zesty.ca](http://www.zesty.ca)). API stands for application programming interface and the Facebook API allows programmers to access Facebook data via a coded interface. This makes it possible to add functionality or build 'apps' for users of the platform, thus enhancing the current interface. In the case of this study, the Facebook API was merely used to access Facebook data in a structured way..

The user-interface, which is the one seen when accessing Facebook is not the same as the programming interface represented by zesty.ca. The API allows a researcher to access the data of a Facebook group or personal profile that is publically viewable. The Facebook users or group administrators determine whether their information is publically viewable through setting their privacy settings accordingly. Instead of using the Facebook API to build a new application, the researcher used it to access the exact categorisation of posts which indicated whether a post was made from a mobile application or not, as well as the time and date of the posts and its comments.

In a pilot study completed during October 2011, it was found that the Facebook group site for NPF does not always provide the correct time stamps for each of the comments and posts made on the site. This often results in the activity being published in the incorrect order or even with incorrect dates. This made capturing the data according to the date problematic. For this reason, zesty.ca was

first visited in order to indicate which posts needed to be captured directly from the Facebook site. This was necessary because zesty.ca does not indicate the application from which comments are posted, while the Facebook user interface does.

Only weekdays were researched as during weekends, some members may be away from the work or university where they have access to desktop computers and in turn access the forum. It was thought that researching weekends would skew results in favour of mobile frequency. An additional reason for the week day format is that week days provide consistency when comparing each week to the other. All data was captured in the morning after the designated day. This was done to capture all the activity of the previous day so that the post could accumulate as many responses for the full duration of the day, and the full day's activity would be collected and recorded. In order to be collected as data that could be sampled the post (along with its comments) had to fulfil the following criteria:

- Posts had to have a minimum of two comments, made by at least two different people (including the person who posted the post).
- All posts containing hyperlinks or pictures were also included.

The rationale for the first criteria was influenced by the theoretical framework, i.e public sphere. As this study aims to investigate whether political discussions (Pappacharissi, 2004) occurred it was determined by the researcher that one comment does not suffice. Such a post was more likely to be a question which elicited one response, or answer and no further discussion took place. Posts such as these were collected and counted, but are excluded from the sample which was coded.

The rationale for the second criteria is that downloading pictures or hyperlinks is admittedly easier to do off computers, but the conversation that follows in the comments is predominantly text-based. Therefore even though mobile users may not be the initiators of these debates due to the limitation of their devices, they can open the links and view the pictures, or even rely solely on the text based discussion which follows.

An exact quantity for the population (posts and comments) of the study could not previously be estimated using only the web interface partially due to the vast amount of activity on the site each day. The zesty.ca API site was used to ascertain the exact total of the day's activity. This method revealed that over the 12 days a total of 1673 posts were made on the New Political Forum page (See figure 3). Once the selection criteria were applied, a total population of 752 posts was created (See figure 4).

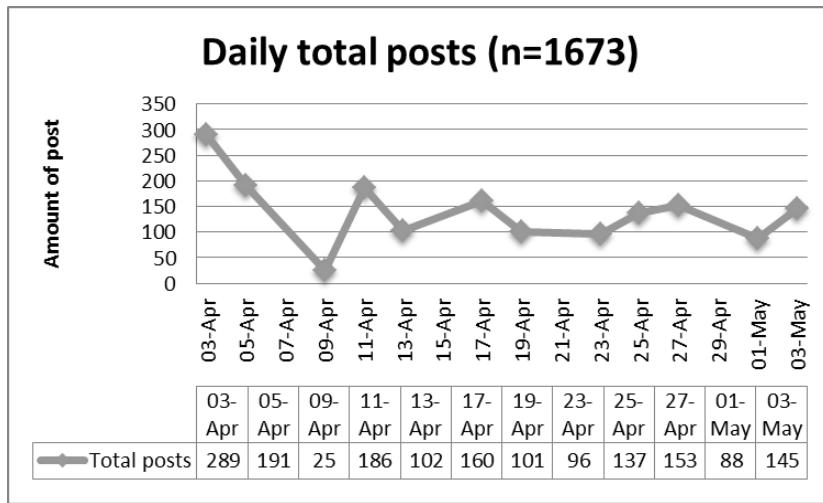


Figure 3 Total daily posts on New Political Forum Facebook group

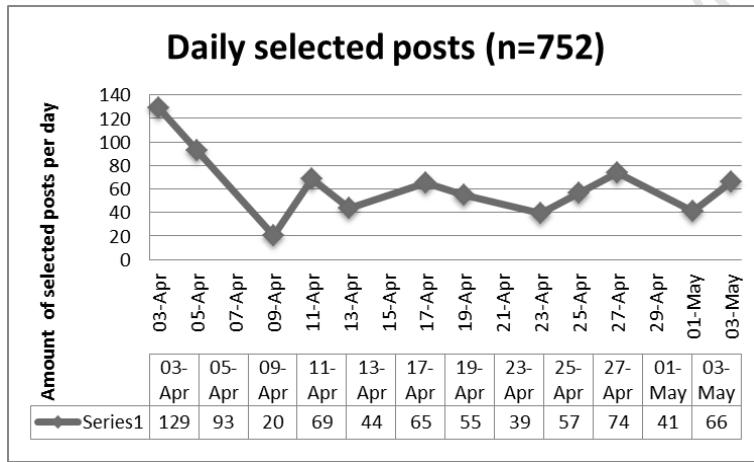


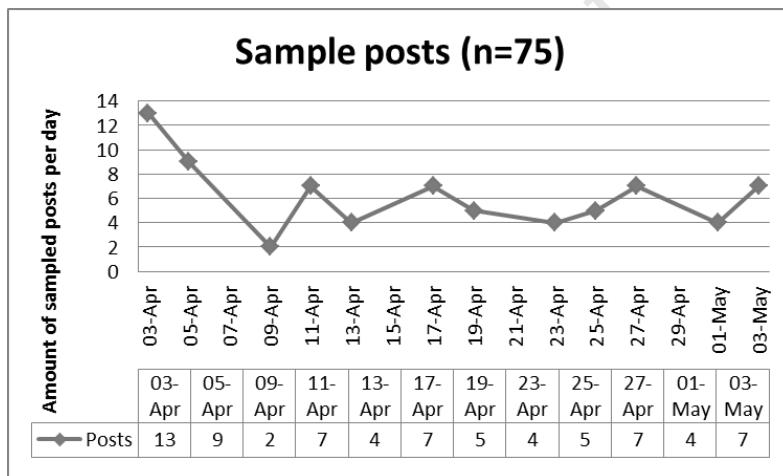
Figure 4 Daily selected posts on New Political Forum Facebook group

When researching similar studies it became apparent that many of the studies did not use a time frame for their studies. In order to compensate for this, they would resort to increasing the size of their sample, which did not help in furthering knowledge creation about the internet. For this reason it was decided that all the posts from a particular month would be included in the population. The representativeness of the study is weakened as a result, since different months may have very different patterns of participation. However, due to the high volumes of activity, the limited scope of this mini-dissertation and the fact that all activity will be manually counted and coded it is only possible to capture and analyse one month of data. The aim of this study was also to contribute towards a methodology for understanding online debate and thus it was more important to prioritise validity by developing a methodology for sampling and analysis rather than ensuring reliability of findings in relation to discussions over a longer period.

#### 4. Select a sample.

All collected data sourced from the zesty.ca site was transferred to a HTML editor, and organised according to the day it was captured. Having access to the HTML code and data fields from zesty.ca allowed the researcher and coder to structure the data, but also to use the saved URLs to revisit the specific comment or post made on the Facebook.com interface to verify the captured information. From this data a sample of all the activity captured on every second day was drawn, qualifying this sample as a systemized random sample (Neuendorf, 2002:77). This method was drawn from a study conducted by Mintz (1949) which revealed that a sample of every second day for 1 month suffices as a representative sample. The transferral of this method to an online environment might not be appropriate but unfortunately no similar models for the internet are available. This model for representativeness will be used in order to test the application of this model online and also to make the vast amounts of data more manageable.

As the 1<sup>st</sup> of April fell on a Sunday, and weekends were excluded, the first day of the study was the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April. This meant that the first day of the sample was the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April. The data capturing period was extended to the first week of May, so as to have a complete month. The daily captured amounts as well as the sample for this study for the month can therefore be shown in the table below:



**Figure 5 Sampled posts per day**

Applying traditional content analysis to an online environment heralds many challenges. One of these challenges is the issue of representativeness. Representativeness of content analysis is meant to be achieved by using a random sample. However, how can one be certain about how representative a sample is of an online community? Or maybe the question is what should the sample be representative of? This online forum might have 15 000 members, but only a fraction of

those members actively participate in the discussions in the group on a daily basis. We also have no idea of the extent to which users ‘lurk’ or view posts without contributing their own posts or comments. Even looking at the entire universe of posts on the group page would not be representative of the experience of debate by an average member, who may check Facebook infrequently, or who may have set preferences which mean that group posts are deprioritised in their feed. This is a distinct limitation and begs the question whether the concept of a representative sample is in fact representative at all in this specific context.

Nonetheless, random sampling was used in this study for two reasons. The first is in order to avoid the kind of researcher bias which might have occurred if the posts were selected manually. The second reason is that the universe was simply too large to be captured and coded in its entirety. For this reason this study cannot claim to be representative. All findings are therefore not to be generalised, and results are specific to this study.

#### Unit of analysis

The unit of analysis for this study was the posts as well as the comment thread collected from the Facebook page of New Political Forum.

#### Coding Categories

All data was coded on three levels. The first level concerns coding whether the posts and comments in the selected sample were made from mobile phone applications or posted from other sources. This coding is based on the categorisation present in the data from the Facebook API.

The second level of coding was more descriptive. This level of coding categorizes each post as a social interaction. This was done in order to crudely characterise social interaction and particularly to gauge what proportion of posts contributed to initiating debate in the group. It also allowed for the investigation of whether involvement in the activities of the group is similar for those who post via mobile applications. The comments on posts were excluded from this level of coding. This is a limitation of the study because often, a post is not received in the same way as it was intended. For instance, one post may flame a certain politician but then starts a debate pertaining to the politician instead. Similarly someone might post something in the hopes of starting a debate, only to be met with comments which ridicule the topic or even the poster.

The third category of coding was used to investigate the amount of text contributed to the group by users posting from mobile applications, by comparing the word count per post contribution.

These codes were applied to answer whether the contributions made by the mobile users and computer users can be characterized differently.

#### Construct the coding frames/categories.

These coding categories were established as a mix between a priori and emergent methods (Weber, 1990). This is because these codes emerged from the pilot study conducted in October 2011, but they were established before the data capturing for this thesis (current research).

Each post and comment was coded in terms of whether it was posted from a mobile application or another source (most likely computers and laptops). The API provided this information for each post and the coding categories were derived from the API. For the comment thread, the Facebook user interface was used because zesty.ca did not make this level of information available. On the New Political Forum's group, mobile application contributions were indicated by the words "via mobile", or with an icon that looks like a mobile phone. Again, this data is automatically coded, this time by Facebook.

The coding for the second level of analysis categorises six kinds of social interaction in the group. This includes initiating debate (when posts express an opinion), express allegiance (using a post to express support for a specific political party, sharing information (sharing news or facts without expressing their own opinions), asking questions (about any matter), and proffering criticism (regarding the topics or the governance of the group). This coding was done manually since human discretion was necessary for this type of coding in the case of uncertainties which computer-assisted methods would not be able to code (Nacos et al, 1991).

#### Establish quantification system

Immediately upon capturing the data each post's information was entered into an Excel spread sheet. The information includes: The post, its mobile application /other origin and how many comments the post elicited and their mobile application/other origins, the topic of the post and the kind of interaction it represents. The mobile application contributions were manually counted in the comment thread section. The word count for each individual post was counted in a simple MS Word document, and captured in the spread sheet.

Due to the scope of the mini-dissertation it was advised that an additional coder was not necessary. This means that testing the validity of the findings through inter-coder reliability (Holsti, 1969) did not occur. This is a limitation of the study.

## **5. Analyze the data**

The following descriptive information was also sought out:

- What was the mean number of posts from mobile applications?
- What is the mean amount of comments from mobile applications?
- What is the mean amount of posts on New Political Forum during one day?

## **6. Draw conclusions and search for indication**

One in-depth online interview was held with some members of New Political Forum for this dissertation. One in-depth interview per administrator was also held for the purposes of this study. The number of participants is in no way representative or statistically significant .Secondly, data captured during October 2011, January and February 2012 was used to provide more context to the kinds of activity and discussions that occur in the Forum. Examples of discussions were used in chapter two.

### **Context- Facebook interviews with group members**

Given the above-mentioned limitations of content analysis alone, it was decided to use supplementary methods to develop a deeper understanding of the history of the New Political Forum group, and to understand the experiences of mobile users who belonged to the group.

Three in-depth online interviews were conducted via Facebook with some members of New Political Forum for this dissertation, with the number of participants in each discussion ranging from 3 to 20. In-depth interviews were also conducted with both the group's administrators. The information from these interviews was used to understand the context of the group, but the participants in the interviews were not drawn from a systematic sample and thus the findings gained this way are in no way representative or statistically significant.

Additional posts and comments from the group were captured during October 2011 during a pilot study, as well as January and February 2012 and were used to contextualise to the kinds of activity and discussions that occurred in the Forum in the month chosen for analysis.

## Ethics

Facebook was created around the practice of people sharing their personal information online and users are often unaware that their information is at risk of being accessed by people who are not their Facebook friends (Acquist & Gross, 2006). Ethical clearance is necessary when research pertains to this personal information (de Villiers, 2010). However, there is an academic grey area when research is done about people's social media practices without using their personal information (Yardi et al, 2009; Jones, 2004). This puts the onus on researchers to act responsibly, and involves the difficult task of providing clarity and protecting those who are in any way involved in the research. Nonetheless the human subject's research model conventionally used by social science researchers is challenged by the text-based nature of the internet. Text-based research methods such as content analysis conventionally do not require the consent of the authors; nonetheless the text shared by human subjects on social network sites is used to construct individual personae. On the one hand, these people need to be protected according to their human rights (Basset & O'Riordan, 2002). On the other hand, overly stringent requirements to gain consent from large numbers of people who have no relationship to the researcher may restrict the knowledge that can be uncovered about the internet, and its use.

Informed consent is a research basic particularly when research is being performed on humans in an environment where they do not expect to be researched (Frankel & Siang, 1999; Eysenbach & Till, 2001:1104). This is of particular concern to the research at hand which investigates an online forum in order to establish whether or not it is a public sphere. Although New Political Forum is a public group, it is conceivable that some of the users might consider their participation private. As the current research does not make use of any personal information of the members in the forum, and the group is accessible to outsiders, the research cannot be considered as research on human subjects (Walther, 2002). Anonymity is provided for the members of the group, but the name of the group is made available so as to enable further research on the group to take place (Lotz & Ross, 2004:506) and data examples which could put the members of the group in any sort of danger will not be used. Nonetheless, the researcher still felt the need to communicate with the administrator and the group members and to introduce my research project to them. Permission was granted by the administrator who also informed the members about the research by starting a discussion in the forum pertaining to this study. The responses to the request were all positive. After the pilot study was completed, all members and admins had full access to the pilot research report and a hyperlink to the report was permanently placed on the information and description section of the group. This

was for the purposes of accountability and transparency to the members and administrators (Miller & Bell, 2002).

When the research for this dissertation got underway the principal administrator was again asked for permission and another discussion was held in the forum, and permission for study was granted again. The size of the group and high levels of activity did prove to be an obstacle in ensuring that every member was made aware that the group is being researched. I felt that the members who are the most active in the group were also most likely to have been active in the Forum on the day of these discussions. The discussions were also available long after they have occurred since they were electronically stored, making them available to those who were not active on the Forum on that day. The administrators and participants of the in-depth discussions were also made aware that the interviews were conducted for the purposes of research.

The necessary ethics clearance was received by the Centre for Film and Media studies (University of Cape Town).

## **Chapter 5: New Political Forum**

The following chapter provides more information about the Facebook Group New Political Forum. The first section sheds light on the rules and administration of the group, and is followed by a discussion on selected group practices.

### **Group rules and administration**

The very first rule of this Forum is that the rules, and the decisions of the administrators (of which there are three) are non-negotiable. One administrator plays a particularly strong governance role in the group. The rules of the group stipulate the kind of activities which are allowed, and this administrator plays a very active role in ensuring that the members participate accordingly. Rules include the prevention of any kind of hate speech, discrimination, personal attacks, and discussions pertaining to religious affiliation, and advertising of commercial services (New Political Forum Rules, 2010).

In an interview with the principal administrator, challenges of administration included ensuring a certain level of quality when it comes to debating (Principal Administrator, 2012). The rules are in place to attempt to ensure this quality, but the administrators find this very difficult to control considering the amount of activity on the site each day. There are currently 20 members on the group's banned list, who have been put there due to being disruptive, having fake profiles and banning the administrators from their profiles. When users block the administrators from seeing their information, the administrators are unable to see any activity contributed by them on the forum .This prevents the administrators from ensuring the rules are followed by the members involved. However, administrators noted that the banned list is cleared frequently and that these members are allowed to come back to the group.

The high levels of activity in the group require administrators to be vigilant and monitor all the posts that are contributed. They do mention their concern at the members accusing them of bias because of deleting some posts and not others, but insist that this is due to not being able to monitor all the activity all day long (Secondary administrator, 2012).

NPF members do comment on group governance. Below is an example of a member expressing his dismay at the removal of a post from the Forum. On this day the Democratic Alliance Student's organization released a picture of a naked black female and in a sexually suggestive position with a naked white man with a tag line stating that in their vision of South Africa, interracial couples such as the one in the picture would not be stared at (Hlongwane, 2012).

*"i see with great disappointment that all posts with the Daso poster were deleted , with the exception of the one mocking it . It just shows how backward, unprogressive and downright (dis)respectful some are for the opinions of others. Administrator, as a moderator, you disappoint me even more . You should leave your partisan views out of discussions , especially when you yield your power as founding member to delete or ban anything or anyone you dont like . As you keep on saying, if you cant take the heat, stay out of the kitchen for the sake of constructive debate . Thank you ."*

This is one example of complaints by members regarding the power that the administrators hold in the Forum. The administrators have the authority to add and remove posts, comments and group members almost at will, and members have no way of countering their actions. However, the rules are in place to ensure accountability both by the members and administrators alike.

### **English as the only language to be used in the Forum**

English is the official language of the group. All the participation is supposed to be English but there are rare moments when isiXhosa and isiZulu posts are made. The requirement for the use English in the group is a very important barrier to participation by South Africans who are not confident in their use of the English language. Often associated with the middle classes of black and coloured South Africans, a command of English is perceived as a sign of relative privilege as well as education. When I asked members about their sentiments regarding the English only rule, their opinions varied (Group discussion, 2012). Some argued that it does not display the diversity of the country and the eleven official languages that are used by its citizens. Others believed that the purpose of New Political Forum is to bring different people together, and the common use of English plays a huge role in achieving that.

### **NPF group practices**

#### **Members do admit their political affiliations**

Many of the frequent users of the group admit their political affiliation, and frequently represent their political affiliations by expressing the views held by their respective parties (ANC, DA, COPE, IFP and the ANCYL). One administrator made particular reference to the ANC members of the group trying to dominate the forum through being disruptive when other political party members start debates. Members on the other hand who are politically active in their branches and in the community have mentioned that they appreciate the diversity within the Forum. During the daily discussions and debates members are exposed to the positions and views of the other political

parties as well as to the views of members who are not politically aligned, unlike when they congregate in their political branches (Group discussion, 2012).

A related challenge of administration that was mentioned was that the administrators themselves are all politically aligned. They are not neutral. Instead, they hold views and opinions of their own and members often fail in trying to reconcile this with the power the administrators hold in the group (Secondary Administrator, 2012).

#### **They often discuss the nature of the debates in the group**

It is stated in the mission of the group that one of its aims is to improve on the debating skills in South Africa (NPF Information, 2011). Members themselves have also mentioned that their participation in the group has in fact improved their debating skills and also given them more confidence to express themselves. Amidst the daily debates, there are also moments when the administration and the members reflect on the kinds of discussions being held in the group. Below is an example of a reflection on the general debate trends in the group:

*"My observation is that in this forum (NPF), majority of members like to post racist/tribal posts and they are responded to with vigor and passion. This is an indication that we are a wounded Nation. Can't we start looking forward?" (Post to New Political Forum Facebook group, 9 April 2012).*

Members also take issue about the debate topics. Below is one such example, along with a selection of responses to the post.

*"I observed this page and over 90% of the forums here talks about Zuma or Malema. Why South Africans particularly the youth are so obsess(ed) (with) those two? Don't we have other subjects? What should we learn from this?" (Post to new Political Forum Facebook Group, 27 April 2012)*

I agree...for so many people politics is synonymous with Zuma and/or Malema. Sure...they make for interesting, controversial discussions and debate, but surely there are more important issues in SA. Let's talk about xenophobia, service delivery and rhino poaching instead of just focusing on two men.

about an hour ago •

Most discussions are about the reckless, unbiased and unfounded rhetoric spewed out by the unruly and poorly educated in politics ex yl president malema who does not care a hoot

*about the ecology, nor future of the economy of SA, and thereby proves his inadequacy as a leader. So much time is spent fostering racial hatred and justifying crime that not much good comes out of all the energy spent here.*

*about an hour ago •*

*Our Youth are ill prepared to debate life changing issues. Sad but true. Its easier to carry on with political gossiping, than discuss the details of our failing municipalities for instance. We can also debate the Matric pass rates .And what about the voting system ? etc.*

*9 minutes ago •*

New Political Forum is constantly reverting back to the aims of the group by remembering the initial aims and attempting to stay true to their mission. The reflection on both governance and member contribution indicates the importance of accountability within the group. The rules of the group help to materialise the expectations of quality discussions from both the administrators as well as the members. The following sections provide the findings of the content analysis and investigate participation through mobile applications in the Forum.

## **Chapter Six: Understanding mobile participation in a Facebook group**

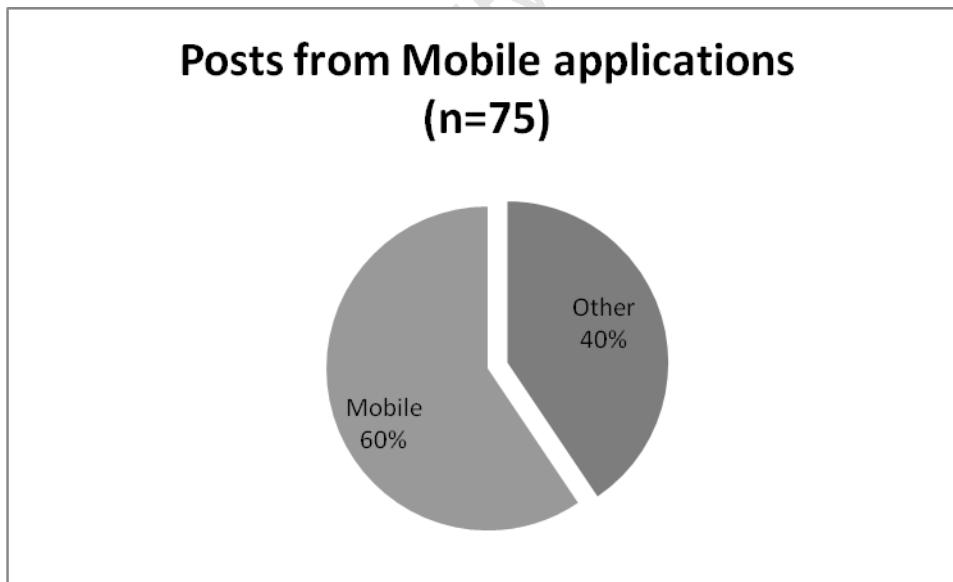
In this chapter, I characterise the nature of mobile participation on the New Political Forum by firstly introducing the findings and analysing these findings in the discussion section which follows. Specific attention is paid to text entry and the frequency of hyperlinks and pictures. This is used to characterise the participation of mobile applications in New Political Forum.

### **Findings**

As discussed in Chapter Four, the findings in this chapter are based on data provided by the Facebook API, which marks the posting application of both posts and comments. Content analysis of the New Political Forum group participation (as sampled during the month of the study [3April – 3 May 2012]) revealed relatively high levels of participation (as discussed in Chapter Four).

As Table 1 (Chapter 3) indicates, a mean of 62,7 posts ( $SD = 28,27$ ) fulfilling the selection criteria were posted to the New Political Forum group on week days during the sampling period. The sample included a total of 11 061 comments, indicating a mean of 16,2 comments ( $SD=5.62$ ) per post .

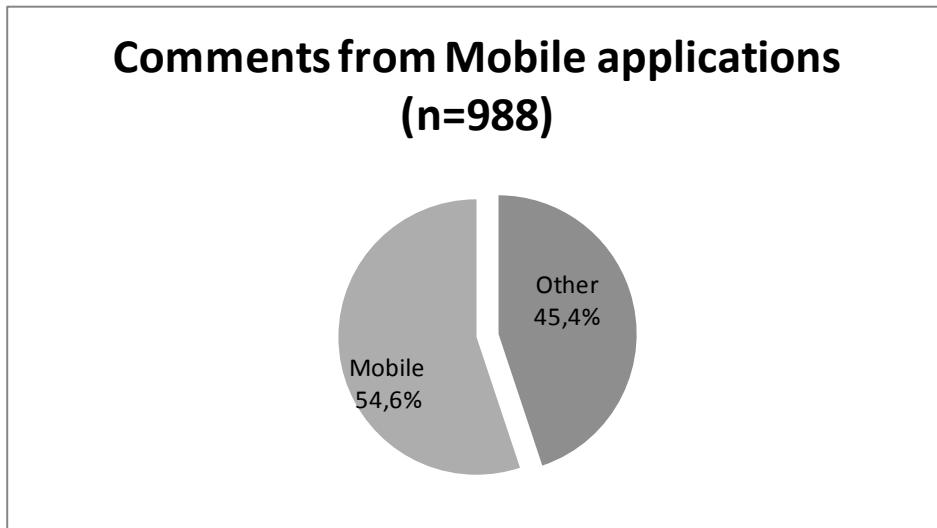
In the randomly selected sample of 75 posts, 45 posts were marked as having been posted from mobile applications. Thus even on weekdays (when mobile use is likely to be lower) in this month more than half of the posts (60%) originated from mobile phones.



**Figure 6 Posts from mobile application**

Similarly, of the 988 comments on the sample of 75 posts 540 or 54.6% were marked as having been posted from mobile applications (See Figure 2). The proportion of comments posted from mobile applications was slightly lower (55%) than the proportion of mobile posts (60%).

With a mean of 45 words per post ( $SD=67.69$ ) posts from mobile applications were, on average, shorter in length than those posted from other applications that had a mean of 83.2 words per post ( $SD=90.31$ ).



**Figure 7 Comments from Mobile applications**

The number of comments per post for posts from mobile applications (12 comments per post) was slightly lower but not dramatically different to the number of comments per post for other posting applications (which received 14.9 comments per post). A more extensive sample would be required to establish the nature of the distribution of posts and comments in the group, and thus the significance of these apparent differences. Given the scope of this mini-dissertation, further statistical analysis was not attempted.

Overall, not many images and hyperlinks were shared. Six photographs were shared in total, with only two posted from a mobile application. Twelve hyperlinks were shared, with only four hyperlinks posted from a mobile application. Save for one link, which was for a page within Facebook, all the other links were to online news sites.

## **Discussion**

Participation in the Facebook group New Political Forum via mobile applications is certainly not dominated by participation from platforms such as computers. Instead, the selected sample suggests

that participation in the group New Political Forum is relatively equally distributed, in terms of both posts and comments, across mobile and other posting applications. This spread is not representative of broader patterns of access in South Africa, where mobile access is available to many more people than desktop internet, thus suggesting that computer users may still have some advantages in participating in online public spheres. Nonetheless, the large proportion of mobile posts is encouraging, suggesting that mobile users are making important contributions, despite the challenges of mobile participation.

### **Text entry**

A stark difference is noted when considering the difference in the size of the posts when comparing the word count from mobile applications to that of other sources. Posts from mobile applications are almost half as small as those posted from other sources. Mobile participation thus appears to be more concise, probably owing to small screens and difficulties with text entry on mobile devices. Members mentioned problems regarding text entry, complaining about instances when after typing up their whole contribution on their mobile phones, only half of it would show up in the group. These incomplete messages have left some members feelings self aware, saying that instances such as these might affect the way that they are perceived by other members of the group, who might consider them to be intellectually inferior due to such an interface or network. These feelings of fear have even prevented some from participating altogether. Fears and frustrations such as these are heightened during times when the same mobile post or comments is posted multiple times, which may be due to the relative ease of erroneously posting several times, the slowness of mobile internet, or else possibly some glitch in the Facebook system.

Another challenge to mobile participation is presented by the vast amount of activity on the site which creates particular challenges when viewed by the user on a small mobile screen. Furthermore, when a notification is clicked on by the user, they are navigated to the New Political Forum group, and not to the specific discussion they were involved in. The process of having to scroll through all the posts and their comments has been described as tedious, especially when arriving at the thread only to discover that all the comments are not being displayed.

### **Hyperlinks and pictures**

The lower rate of sharing images and links via mobile applications may be explained to some extent by the difficulties of linking via phones. Nonetheless, as I explain below, even when posting from desktop browsers, members also appeared to prefer copying and pasting text onto Facebook rather than linking to outside sources.

Only four links were shared by mobile phones in the sample. The way in which links are posted from mobile browsers, and the sophisticated mobile phones needed to post links in this way, might help to explain this lower rate of linking.

When desktop browsers are used to share links the link is accompanied by what is called a thumbnail, or a picture along with a short description of the site as well as the article. Below is an example of a computer-shared hyperlink, along with its thumbnail (Figure 3).

The screenshot shows a Facebook post. At the top, there is a URL: <http://www.2oceansvibe.com/2012/04/13/the-coffers-run-dry-construction-of-julius-malemas-sandton-home-halted/>. Below the URL is a small thumbnail image of a man, identified as Julius Malema. Underneath the thumbnail is the title of the article: "The Coffers Run Dry: Construction Of Julius Malema's Sandton Home Halted | 2oceansvibe.com". Below the title is the website URL again: "www.2oceansvibe.com". A short description follows: "Julius Malema's fall from the graces of his ANC handlers seems to have eroded much more than his political riches. The Beeld newspaper reported that Malema was allegedly unable to settle debt of R400 000 owed to his building contractor at the end of March, after which the company decided to transfer...". At the bottom of the post are several interaction buttons: "LikeUnlike" (with a like icon), "Comment" (with a comment icon), "Follow PostUnfollow Post" (with a follow icon), "Share" (with a share icon), and the timestamp "Yesterday at 4:40am near Randburg, Gauteng".

**Figure 8** Hyperlink when posted from a computer

Sharing links requires a more sophisticated browser, and thus it is likely to be done by users with smart phones. When a link is shared via mobile phone, the post will look as follows (Figure 9):

The screenshot shows a Facebook post from a mobile device. The main text of the post is: "I think this will b the solution if it is the truth!Amaaaaandla!". Below the text is a shortened URL: <http://owl.li/afDLs>. At the bottom of the post are interaction buttons: "Like" (with a like icon), "Comment" (with a comment icon), "Follow Post" (with a follow icon), and the timestamp "Yesterday at 7:43am via n".

**Figure 9** Hyperlink when posted from a mobile phone

It can thus be seen that links from a mobile phone leave much to be desired. Only the hyperlink is visible, with no information or description of the article or the site on which the article has been found. This link has been shortened by the member so even less information is available, as the original link would at least provide the name of the site. Therefore when looking at the post, no one knows what it is about and without the member stipulating what the link is about, there is very little motivation to navigate away from the group page.

A practice which the group has taken up is to provide the link, or a text based description and then go on to cut the entire article off the site and paste it on the group page. This means that mobile users and computer users have the convenience of reading the entire article without having to navigate away from the group, as all the necessary information is right there. This could provide an explanation as to why the computer posts only had eight examples of links in the entire sample. Most examples of news being shared in both the computer and mobile samples are text based, an example of which can be seen below (Figure 10).

The SABC has placed its group chief executive of news, Phil Molefe, on special leave after he apparently defied his senior executives' orders to stop giving too much air time to Cde Julius Malema. Could he be bias or following somebody's order? #justchecking

Like · Comment · Follow Post · Yesterday at 10:48am via mobile

Figure 10 Practice of sharing news via text

## Characterising Mobile Application Usage

Despite the text entry and hyperlink challenges that mobile application users are encountering in their daily participation in the Forum, members still engage using their mobile phones. During the interviews members disclosed that their use of the mobile phone application is largely due to convenience, in that they are always connected to the debate even when they are physically changing locations during the day. Their participation is thus also happening across the platforms, alluding to the practice of using certain platforms during certain times.

Mobile application participation in New Political Forum appears to be heavily intertextual .This could be because the focus of the group is discussion and debate, thereby emphasising text contributions. As an online space where members come together, the practice of sharing links to navigate the users away from the group is not common. Instead, members have developed practices such as copying and pasting articles for the purpose of ensuring that members stay in the Forum to discuss the daily issues at hand. Members have also mentioned that the kind of phone they use also impacts their participation. When using feature phones they have claimed that they are limited to being consumers of information, whilst smart phones enable them to be more active participators. Nevertheless, mobile application participation rivals and even exceeds participation from other sources, indicating that the obstacles they face are worth it.

## Chapter Seven -New Political Forum as an Online Public Sphere

Now that the mobile application participation has been characterized, the focus turns to characterizing the interactions in the group. Findings reveal that most of the posts set out to initiate debates, but a surprising quantity of the interaction centers around sharing information. Investigating and comparing the mobile applications to the larger interaction patterns of the group reveal that there is no real difference in the way that mobile applications interact on New Political Forum. The second section of this chapter presents the application of Poor's (2005) Online Sphere criteria and confirms that New Political Forum can in fact be considered an Online Public Sphere.

### Findings - Characterising interactions

Overall, the posts in the sample (89%) appeared to have been motivated by an intention to engage in debate or to share information. As Figure 11 reveals, the majority of posts initiated debate (60%) or provided information (29%).The remaining 11% was split between extending invitations, asking questions, expressing allegiance and conveying criticisms. The breakdown of posts from mobile applications was similar, with 62% initiating debate and 27% providing information.

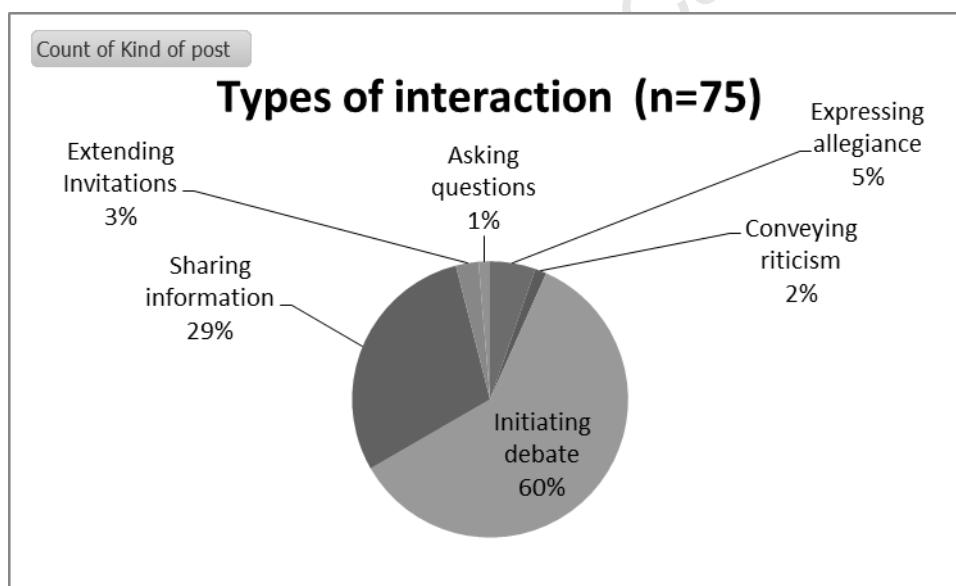


Figure 11 Types of posts

### Discussion – Characterising interactions

#### Sharing news and information

These posts were defined as links, as well as text- based posts that were reporting information without taking a position. The amount of posts that were coded as sharing information was much

higher than expected because of the emphasis in the group rules as well as its aims and mission to create a platform primarily for debate. Through the content analysis it thus became apparent that sharing information is an important function of the group. There is always the possibility that information is shared and that it eventually sparks a debate. However, there is also the possibility that the information is shared for the purposes of opinion formation. Habermas also emphasized the importance of news media in the public sphere which provided the information needed for the public sphere to debate and discuss. With the media as information providers, the public were left to focus on developing their own opinions which would in turn sometimes influence or induce action they were to take in the future.

The media also plays an important role in this group. As mentioned in chapter 2, New Political Forum's rules 5 and 6 deal directly with the use of media in the forum. All members are often requested to provide their source of information when sharing news, in order for other members to verify it as the truth. As discussed in the previous chapter, sometimes members do this through sharing hyperlinks. This is done when they paste the hyperlink of the news article as a post or in the comment thread.

### **Invitations to offline events**

An interesting aspect of the findings is that examples of invitations to offline events, of which there were only two, both came from the mobile sample. Both the examples are members inviting group members to ANC or ANC affiliated events. The examples can be seen below.

The first example was addressed to ANCYL members only, and was completely text based.

ATTENTION ANCYL members " CHRIS HANI MEMORIAL LECTURE " UNISA ANCYL invites all progressive forces to attend and celebrate the life and times of comrade Chris Hani .... SPEAKERS : 1. Cde Julius Malema ( guest speaker ) 2. CdeFikileMbalula( Minister of Sport and Recreation ) 3. Dr. Mathew Phosa( UNISA chairperson of Council ).... DATE : 10 APRIL 2012 .... VENUE :Dr. MARIAM MAKEBA HALL ( UNISA MAIN CAMPUS, PRETORIA ) TIME : 16H30 - 20H00.



Like · · Follow Post · 16 hours ago via mobile

The second example was open to all members and shared an actual flyer of the event as a picture, providing members with the exact invitation. Even though the flyer was designed and created with sophisticated desktop or laptop facilities, the use of a mobile phone in the dissemination of this flyer is an example which indicates a possibility in the use of a mobile phone. The sample collected had few instances of pictures being posted from mobile applications, and members mentioned the

difficulty faced when trying to upload pictures. However, pictures are easily viewable with mobile access. This adds weight to the way in which mobile applications can and could be used to disseminate political invitations.

Mzala Branch is hosting a Festival of Ideas. Featuring ANC provincial sec. David Makhura. Join us



Like · · Follow Post · 11 hours ago via mobile

## Expressing allegiance

Both mobile and computer users had a low percentages of posts where they stated their allegiance. An example of this would be a member posting a message of support to its political party, and receiving a few responses saying, “viva”, “amandla”, or any other phrase of agreement or praise.

The fact that this category received only 5% is a good indication. Most political parties use Facebook Fan pages, where members have to “like” the pages in order to participate and receive updates from that group. It is unlikely that people who are literally non-supporters of the party will “like” the page. This is because all the pages that an individual “likes” are listed as personal information on their respective Facebook page, which is often publically viewable. “Liking” a page which they do not support will mean that they are misrepresenting themselves, a misnomer on a site so imperative to impression management.

Many a time these pages are understandably dominated by posts which would be considered posts of allegiance. The people who “like” these pages are called “fans” and they often act accordingly. If they don’t, there is an appointment and paid administrator who monitors the page for any posts which might harm the brand of the organization in any way. This is not the kind of environment which inspires debate. South African political parties use this to keep their members informed about

the latest developments in their organizations. Most of the time arguments develop when people who are not fans in real life,' like' the pages only to receive these information updates or to stir up trouble on the Fan page.

The low percentage of allegiance therefore indicates that solely expressing political support to a political party is not common place in the group.

### **Criticism and Questions**

As mentioned in the methodology chapter, posts were coded as questions when they asked non-rhetorical questions and posts were made and used for the sole purpose of gaining information. Critical posts are important, in that they hold the group and its members accountable for the kinds of discussions that are occurring in the group. Considering that this coding frame yielded low results it might be indicative of the relative satisfaction felt by most members. Likewise, the questions coding frame might be indicative of some members viewing the group as a source of information which they can trust.

### **Patterns of interaction in an Online Public Sphere**

These findings probably reflect the very specific intention with which the group was set up, and the vigilance of its administrators who ensure that participation conforms to group norms. The administrators have concurred that the group needs constant supervision in order to ensure that the members participate within the rules and guidelines that have been stipulated. The primary administrator has said that these rules are a key aspect to the ease with which the group is run, as both administrators and members are held accountable to the rules through their daily participation in New Political Forum.

### **Participating in an Online Public Sphere**

In the following section, it is suggested that the nature of participation in the group could meet Poor's (2005) criteria for an online public sphere. The four criteria he created are applied to New Political Forum, and empirical examples from the captured data are used to characterise the kinds of topics that were covered in that month.

#### **1. Debate and dialogue are to occur.**

According to Poor (2005) discussion and debate occur when users contribute and then reply to the comments, creating a discussion thread. The interface of Facebook allows this to occur through its format which enables a member to post a message, and in so doing start a conversation. Facebook

then facilitates discussion by having a comment thread, which allows the group members to respond to the initial post but also allows the members to respond to new messages left in the comment thread. A third way in which Facebook assists debate and dialogue through its interface is its Notifications function. Through notifications, all Facebook users are notified via email, SMS, or application notification when there is any response (like a comment) to any activity which they have initiated or been mentioned in. This means that a member who initiates a debate through a post, or contributes to the discussion, will be notified when there is any new contribution to the discussion. This group also has a function called “Follow post” which allows members of the group who are not directly participating in the group to be notified about new developments and contributions to the debate. This also potentially fulfils boyd's (2007) “invisible audiences” criterion, mentioned in the theoretical framework chapter.

The following is a typical example of a debate or discussion on the Forum. This post was reflecting on the South African ex-Police Commissioner, Bheki Cele . At the time of data collection, General Bheki Cele was under review by a board of inquiry, which had determined that his initiation of and participation in a leasing deal on behalf of his department was improper and bordered on corruption (Maroma, 20120). During his tenure as Police Commissioner, he introduced controversial reforms such as a shoot-to- kill policy for policemen and also introduced military rankings in the police force (Timeslive, 2011). Below, the members evaluate the successes of failures of his time as General Bheki Cele.

*Cele is almost out the door.....personally i liked him, he was very hands on, we need leaders like him....as for the lease deal, eish.*

*Like · · Follow Post · Yesterday at 10:01am*

**Member A:** *I second you on that statement, I think he gave the police dignity in the way he handled situations, and was not an office person but a public one as well. Its too bad it had to end like this for him.*

*Yesterday at 10:05am*

**Member B:** *No no. the man has to. under him our police was corrupt. high level corruption wasnt prioritisd. tender irregularities. police did nothing on sexual orientation related crimes. above all ,he violated the constitution and called himself a general while our constitution talks of comisioner. he must go. lets not (forget) hw the sunday times news reporter life was unda threat after exposing the*

*lease scandals. its time real policemen nt politicians become comisionerz .hw can we forget irregular promotions!*

Yesterday at 10:14am via mobile

**Member A:** *either way for someone who did not know all that, as a public ambassador he had the right attitude I think, all I can say to that ..education is very important.*

Yesterday at 10:18am

**@ Member B** *we all have our flaws and weaknesses, corruption and crime were there long before General Cele came into office, as colourful as it was, he certainly had his own way of dealing with crime, as for the commissioner/general title it certainly had no forthright bearing towards anything unconstitutional !! what harm did it do, i agree and concur, fully and unreservedly with what the Poster has just alluded to !!*

Yesterday at 10:32am

**Member D:** *gona miss da General if he's really out!!*

Yesterday at 11:22am via mobile

**Member E:** *Let us not forget to mention that incidents of police brutality sky-rocketed under him!*

*Thanks God he is on his way out...we nearly became a police state under this "General"*

Yesterday at 11:33am via mobile

This is a clear example of the coherent nature of the debates which occur. Facebook has a “tagging” function which in this case enables members to mention each other’s names in their posts, allowing them to engage with one another directly, whilst informing them and other observers who their comment is directed to.

The contribution by **Member D** might not appear to be rational, but it does contribute to the hallmark of debate: difference of opinion. The rest of the discussion is used by members to discuss the future of Bheki Cele, with one particular member stating ironically that his corrupt behaviour actually makes him perfect for the South African government and will ensure that he still has a bright future in public service. The debate therefore also reflected on the state of government and its values in South Africa.

On the very first day of data capturing, the forum was abuzz with speculation and interpretation. The top six officials of the ANC had called an emergency press conference (Mahlangu, 2012). They did not inform anyone regarding what the press conference would be about, only that it would air nationally on 3 April 2012 at 4pm. During the press conference, the top six attempted to make it known that they remain united. This is in light of the ANC Youth League making it known that they were no longer in support of President Zuma continuing for a second term, while voicing their support for Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe to be his presidential successor in 2014 (Pieterse, 2012). The activity on that day was high both before and after the conference, as the group members tried to make sense of the press conference, which many believed to be unsuccessful in its attempts to profess party unity.

*Whoever came up with de idea of a media briefing myt have smoked sumthing. There's nothing tangible frm (that) pres conference except de top six confirming dt JZ is a real dictator. Today marks shame 2 our movement...*



Like · · Follow Post · [14 hours ago via mobile](#)

**Member A:** Who come with the idea infect?

[14 hours ago via mobile](#) ·

**Member B:** Our leadership, that question is already answered by our SG

[13 hours ago via mobile](#) ·

**Member C:** Member B, was that an honest response by the SG??? It ws just a waste of time. Instead of meeting with the YL they are busy wasting airtime on SABC!!

[11 hours ago via mobile](#) ·

**Poster:** There was nothing communicated there **Member B**. Unless u hv smthn 2 clarify us wit.

**Member A,** I dnt doubt ur gud school of thot...

[11 hours ago via mobile](#) ·

**Member D:** Meaning there was nothing to please counter-revolutionaries? To us ANC members, we are for once, pleased to see such a united front by our leaders despite efforts by Malema and his

*cohorts to divide them at the so called 'centenary celebrations'! Mkhuluwa has cleared the air, 'the attempts to divide' will not work! We celebrate, to some its nothing to us its everything!*

[10 hours ago](#) via [mobile](#) ·

**Poster:** *Member D, is uniformity and unity de same 2 u? De press statement ws empty except answerz given based on questions posed. Most, if nt all, questions were not premised from de press statement read out by de SG. Unity is not an event, its a lifestyle. It cant be seen in pres briefings but in real life. Do u thnk Mathew n Zuma hv de same understanding moving forward? Dnt be shallow....*

[10 hours ago](#) via [mobile](#)

**Member D:** *Poster, I believe on uniformity you have just answered yourself! Remember the lifestyle of the ANC is Democratic Centralism, which is what was confirmed at the press briefing! Unless you don't understand what I'm talking about, then you will be forgiven for missing the point!*

[9 hours ago](#) via [mobile](#)

**Member E:** *Me thinks the NEC had asked the Top 6 to respond to & deal with the recent utterances by some of leaders of the ANCYL which the NEC felt were disingenuous & misleading to the SA society, which I think the Top 6 did. What is it perhaps which is tangible that we feel the Top 6 should've said besides or on top of what it said? Do we feel there were gaps left, what might be those gaps?.....personally I'm so interested in them.*

[8 hours ago](#) via [mobile](#)

These were the kind of discussions which followed the announcement of the press conference, and the actual briefing itself. The lack of communication regarding the purpose and aims of the press conference left the members to try and flesh out what the intentions of the Top 6 were. This proves to be interesting because it is an example where the lack of information stimulates speculation and in so doing increased debate (this day recorded the highest levels of debates).

## **2. New people are to enter the dialogue who did not enjoy the privilege or leisure of inclusion before.**

Poor (2005) related this criteria in a rather superficial manner. In his analysis, the site called Slashdot fulfilled this aspect of the public sphere because it was originally a space to come and discuss issues solely related to computers and technology. The site later developed forums for a variety of topics.

For the current study, this aspect has deeper meaning rooted in the history and the means the members use to access the group.

As mentioned previously, the origins of this group have its roots in the aim of initiating a free discussion forum, since its founding members started the group after being removed from the old ANC official fan page for discussing matters the administration would not allow (NPF History, 2011). Free discussion was the aim when creating the group. One could also put forward that mobile internet access also allows people to access the group, who could not previously enjoy inclusion. . This relates to the mobility of the mobile phones. The members can be part of the same discussion, irrespective of their geographical location. Even though members might be physically dispersed nationally, they are now able to come together online in a central place for their debates. Mobile phones also allow members to continue engaging on the forum, as long as they have their phones on their person. This is unlike with computers, which are usually unable or less convenient to carry around. By using a mobile phone to access the group throughout the day, members never have to miss out on the day's activity and can always be included.

### **3. The dialogue is to concern political matters.**

New Political Forum is, as the name states, political in nature. The mission statement of the group asserts that the group is for those concerned with the promotion of improving living standards, job creation, and the delivery and improvement of services (NPF information, 2011). One could argue that these are all inherently political matters. As mentioned before, many group members also profess their political affiliation openly. All the founders of the group are politically affiliated and even members of political parties such as the ANC, ANCYL and the SACP. The group also has very active members who are known DA supporters.

One could ask how the group maintains its political focus as previous discussions on online spheres relate how the extremists and the racists often have a strong online presence in forums such as these. Previously research has attributed this to a lack of established and widely accepted rules and norms. NPF has a set of rules, as mentioned previously in Chapter 5, rule three specifically states that "*hate speech, insults, vulgar language, abuse, racism, personal attacks, religion, tribalism, sexism and criticism aimed at ADMINS OR FELLOW MEMBERS, Groups or organizations outside New Political Forum Page are not permitted*" ( NPF rules, 2011). As with all public bodies, rules are not enough. They need to be vigorously enforced as well. The strong administration of the group ensures the members abide by these rules.

Below is an example of the kind of political topics discussed in the Forum. This one specifically deals with the South African electoral system.

*Should South Africa hold direct elections for the position of President as does almost all other republics in the world, including other African states?*

*Like · · Follow Post · 10 hours ago*

**Member A:** *It will be a good initiative but i dont think it will work under our conditions. That will require regulation of people who will sponsor individuals campaigns and so on. It sounds good but its not as simple as it looks on paper. But a good initiative.*

*10 hours ago*

**Poster:** *Perhaps sometime down the road then?*

*10 hours ago*

**Member B:** *That would be a horrible thing to happen, electioneering in the US start immediately after a new president wins election before he is even inaugurated, imagine what that would do to SA*

*10 hours ago via mobile*

**Member C:** *I think dt will be an ideal concept and at least political parties will vanguard the interest of the masses unlike the chunky bunny we see today in our country*

*9 hours ago via mobile*

**Member D:** *educate someone like me, how would that work and where in the world does that apply*

*9 hours ago*

**Member E:** *France Russia US Brazil Nigeria Kenya Brazil etc etc. You vote for a person not a party directly electing the President Of course parties can have candidates but nothing prevents a private person from also running.*

*9 hours ago*

**Member D :** *in the mentioned countries have we ever had a private individual winning elections? if yes who?*

9 hours ago

**Member E:** *Independent candidates? I honestly dont know. that you will have go and look up. But especially in system like US where the voters first choose the party candidates at first and then have the election is very democratic.*

9 hours ago

**Member E:** *France Mexico Brazil etc have same kind of primaries system where all party members elect the candidate*

9 hours ago .

**Poster:** *I'd say independents winning is rare. So in a way, the parties (who choose their leaders) would still have much power. But I think it would at least give the voter a bit more of a direct choice.*

8 hours ago

Another example of the political discussions on the forum deals with ex- ANC Youth League President, Julius Malema. This individual has become a media cash cow in South Africa, receiving a lot of attention because of his controversial nature. Malema , who became active in ANC politics from the age of 9, was one of Zuma's key supporters during his corruption trial and his campaign for ANC president with Malema going as far as to say that he will "kill for Zuma" (Bauer, 2011). Malema gained his controversial status through calls for land redistribution, nationalization and offending white South Africans on a frequent basis (BBC Online, 2012). Whilst he embodied controversy, he also garnered a massive support base of impoverished, mainly young black South Africans. Political tides changed and when Malema's support for Zuma stopped, and the ex- Youth League president was subsequently charged with sowing divisions in the ANC and finally expelled from the party on 24 April 2012 (News24, 2012), which was during the time of data capturing. Many of the ANC Youth League members still refuse to accept the judgement and continue to call Malema their president until 2014. These trends are seen in the group; with some members continuing to love him while others continue to hate him, both groups however continue to talk about him.

Below is an example of a discussion pertaining to Julius Malema and his allegedly unpaid taxes. Malema is a self- professed champion of the poor but is consistently in the news for his flashy lifestyle of multiple houses and owning expensive suits and cars (Timeslive, 2012).

*MALEMA is officially bankrupt. HE OWES THE TAX MAN....R10 million !!! OMG where will he get the money ? Now I understand why he fired his Sandton staff, and stopped building. The corrupt income he received from Mathale and other corrupt businessmen, is coming back to haunt him. The rich Skelm..is going to jail.*

Like · · Follow Post · Yesterday at 9:08am near Cape Town

**Member A:** If Julius owes R10 million in tax and this was calculated at 35% of total earnings, this means he earned a total revenue of R28.5 million. How???

23 hours ago

**Member B:** how cn a man look in other man's pocket?

23 hours ago via mobile

**Poster:** The MAN looking into others pockets are the TAX MAN **Member B..**the taxman is juju's boogy man, and will land him in jail soon.

23 hours ago

**Member C:** TAX MAN for him getting so far and other government agencies to political matters it is what will destroy south africa and you **POSTER** you will Reap what you Sow in future.

22 hours ago

**Poster:** I posted this because Malema was adored by the UNINFORMED poor people. Actually Malema was milking our tax coffers, and not even doing his bit by paying taxes. Taxes are used to alleviate poverty amongst our peoples, and for development. In a sense Malema and his thieving friends are working against the so called NDR (National Democratic Revolution).

22 hours ago

**Member B:** chief r u sure abt wat ur saying lets wait 4 the report frm taxman.

22 hours ago via mobile

**Poster:** The taxman will not divulge confidential tax info. BUT if a person dont pay, it goes to court and becomes public info.

22 hours ago

**Member D:** *Its gona be tough 4 Malema who act as if he is fighting 4 poor ppl while busy enriching himself wit millions , what goes around comes around now is the time 4 him to pay or go 2 jail , more businessmen will come out n expose him soon.*

22 hours ago via mobile

**Poster:** '<http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/Malema-owes-R10m-20120422>'

22 hours ago · Like

**Member B:** *i agree wen wil malema go 2 court?*

22 hours ago via mobile

**Member A:** *2 things are certain - death and taxes. Either pay or go to jail. Cases against the revenue services are also relatively unsucessful. So, likelyhood is either which way, it is looking bad for JuJu. PaPa wag vir jou...*

22 hours ago

**Member E:** *The posted story on malema its just a tip of iceberg man politicians take bribes just look at Gautrain, WORLD CUP 2010 infrastructure developments and many more of malema alone its nothing compared to billions that are taken by other politicians that are not vocal about poor living conditions of masses just visit alexandra township see how people live with rats its a shame.*

22 hours ago

Interestingly, both of these examples contain an element of education in them. Members seem to feel comfortable enough to ask questions, if they don't understand the processes or procedures that are being discussed. This speaks to the forum as a place where members feel safe enough to ask questions and to freely inquire about the topics discussed so as to build their own opinions. This is the function of the public sphere as proposed by Habermas (1989).

The comment contributed by **Member D** where he tells the Poster that he will reap what he sows might not be rational or political in nature. However, it also speaks to the member feeling safe enough to express frustration and anger in a way that is not abusive or rude. This could be due to the well-developed set of rules and the well-maintained governance within the group.

#### **4.The identities of the people sharing ideas should not influence the reception of the ideas.**

When a group of people get together offline and congregate to discuss matters of political relevance to their lives, many social dynamics come into play which can, at times, be avoided online. One such element is intimidation when speaking to people who are from high level positions in government or other influential sectors. Facebook is all about people and their personal information. So what happens in a forum such as this one where member's profiles are on the same site as that of the group? Facebook allows users to have privacy settings activated on their accounts. This could mean that the entire user's information will only be viewable to those who the user allows. While participating on the forum, members will only be allowed to see the information which users have set as publically viewable information. This means that most of the time, only a profile picture and a name will be the available information to the user. From the name and the picture, one might be able to guess the gender and the race of the member. Admittedly, this information could affect the personal reception of ideas. The rules of the group play a role in ensuring that the debate centres on ideas, by emphasising prohibited behaviour likely to stem from many kinds of derogatory drivel often seen online (Dahlgren, 2005). Other than that, information about each other is mostly hard to come by, and so ideas could very likely be judged upon their merit, instead of their messenger.

One way of interpreting this criterion is by looking at equality between the members, as shown in the section above. However, another way in which this criterion is applicable is that the Forum creates the space for members to come and critique the ideas of other members who might hold stature in society. Below is an example of such a situation. On the 19<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of former SACP president Chris Hani, his daughter commemorated him in a speech in which she criticised the ANC for corruption and called it's leaders "thugs " (Boya, 2012). Members took to the Forum to deliberate on what she had said.

*(Translated from Xhosa)*

*Chris Hani's daughter says the ANC is ruled by criminals that's is why her father's issue is no longer paid attention, even those who were family of the investigator of the SACP are no longer being paid attention.*



Like · · Follow Post · 7 hours ago via mobile

**Member A:** *That girl is mad. She is not helping, just blaming and criticizing. She is forward.*

7 hours ago via mobile ·

**Member B:** *She must be suspendend from ANC for calling our leaders crooks*

7 hours ago via mobile ·

**Member C:** *cos the leadership suspends all those that questions the founding morals... Where is the revolutionary ANC, m sick n bored of the ANC that is of human rights agenda*

6 hours ago · Like ·

Irrespective of the fact that these words were spoken by the daughter of a revered struggle hero, the members of the group still took issue with what she had to say. This is reminiscent of Fraser's (1992) recommendation for multiple publics, which she believed would subvert any intimidation from silencing ordinary members of society. Intimidation in certain cases may silence some, whilst others may feel coerced to agree with those in power. Here all three members involved in the discussion took a different position. One criticized her, one (ANC member, judging from the words "our leaders") called for action against her and one agreed with her.

Therefore, identities of the members have limited influence on the reception of their respective ideas through the protection provided by the Facebook interface and their own privacy settings. Secondly, the Forum creates the space for ordinary members of society to come and address and debate the ideas put forward by individuals who might be considered elite's in society.

# Conclusion

## New Political Forum as an Online Sphere

From the discussion and the data examples above it becomes apparent that New Political Forum meets all the criteria postulated by Poor (2005) and therefore qualifies as an online sphere. However, due to the multiple discussions and their respective topics that occur in the group everyday one could put forward the idea that there are multiple public spheres in and facilitated by this Facebook group. Each discussion is facilitated through the interface of Facebook, which can protect the identity of its members. This fulfils criterion four regarding the reception of ideas irrespective of identity. Through posting, commenting and following posts, the interface also facilitates discussions and direct debate amongst users. This fulfils criterion one. The forum was created for the purpose of open discussions which are political in nature, fulfilling criterion three. The group was also created for members who were previously excluded from political discussions and the mobile aspect enables even more people to be included in the daily debates, which fulfils criterion two.

Therefore, the group does not function as one central public sphere in the sense that one discussion occurs and all 15 000 members take part in it. New Political Forum provides the platform for "micro" (Keane, 1995), informal (Schneider, 1997) publics, in which mobile participation is higher than the participation of computer users. Even though the internet and this group, do have the capacity to create and maintain one single large public the users have opted to have multiple discussions everyday perhaps due to the multiple issues there are to discuss on a daily basis. Polat (2005) has insisted that such smaller, issue specific debates rather than one large public with many issues and even more voices are preferable. This allows the discussions to be more intimate and manageable, much like face-to-face public spheres

New Political Forum did not appear to be a counter public; rather it had a very close relationship with what was in the media. This could be because of the rules of the group regarding the provision of facts in debates, and the enforcing of those rules play a major part. It is suggested that a criterion should be included in the criteria which considers information sharing when looking at the large segment of activity that was coded as such. The information which is shared can also change opinions of those in the forum. Poor's (2005) understanding of counter publics being identity related also provides reason as to why this group is not a counter public. The researcher was surprised at the lack of identity related issues in the forum. Again, this could be because of the rules in the group

which prohibit racism. Similarly, the members know that the issue is a sensitive subject and might be veering away from the top for that reason.

It is accepted as a positive that the participation of mobile application has only slight character differences when compared to other sources. The minimal difference in the characterization of the participation in the group indicates that the challenges presented by the interface of the mobile phones do not prevent citizens from political engagement online. The only remarkable difference was in the comparison of the word count which indicated that posts from other sources were twice as long as those from mobile applications. From this it can be deduced that mobile application access does not affect whether users will participate, but it does affect the way in which they participate in that their contributions are likely to be more concise. Further research on the difference in word count is recommended.

Groups such as this could go a long way in countering the effects of market segmentation tools in political communication (Gandy, 2001) .Considering that mobile phones have such high adoption rates in South Africa it is hoped that governments, civil society and even private sectors will turn to this medium not only to send out their messages, but also to hear the voices of the people on the other side of the line.

## **Limitations**

The qualities of content analysis as presented by Pool et al (1955) which are impartiality, accuracy and generalizability are perhaps the ideal. One strives to reach them in every manner, but it also has its contradictions and challenges especially when applied to the internet. This does not mean that the content analysis requirements must be ignored. Rather, researchers must continue to apply the methodology as strictly as possible in order to show its flaws when applied to the internet. Through this we can hope to improve and adapt the methodology, once we have been made aware of all its challenges.

The first challenge to the foundations of the methodology is that since pictures and hyper-links were collected in addition to text-based posts, the unit of analysis was not uniform. This answers the call by Herring (2010:11) who says that the multimodal nature of the web needs to be accommodated in content analysis. In this case the posts were the primary unit of analysis, but the content of the posts was not always uniform. In this study it did not detract anything from the methodology to expand the unit of analysis.

Papacharissi (2004), Scott et al (1996) and Hill & Hughes (1997) all studied the entire thread of discussions as their unit of analysis. This route is intensified by the occurrence that the nature of the discussion tends to change. Some of these authors acknowledged that the subject changes over the course of the discussions, and they coded for these numerous subjects accordingly. This research opted not to do this manually because of the high level of difficulty in separating subjects. It is therefore a limitation of this thesis that the eventual discussion that develops after the post is not accounted for.

An additional limitation would be the lack of generalizability. Stempel (2000) suggested that sample size rationale and generalizability can be done away with because one can't claim findings are representative for a platform (the internet) that is growing every day. However, one of the ways in which findings could become more generalizable and representative is by using bigger data sources, over longer periods of time. Himmelboim (2010) took this route by having a data source of 207 419 participants and studying more than 30 groups for 6 years. When considering the rate of change on the internet, and the life cycle of these kinds of sites a tension is created between accurate representation, and relevance. Taking a few years to do a study might remedy issues relating to making findings more accurate and painting a truer picture of the data. However, will the findings still be relevant so many years after the data collection? This study therefore makes no claims beyond the time of data collection. Also, using an API programme such as Zesty.ca was helpful in that it made information available about the population that could not be found on the Facebook group itself. Using programmes such as this aid us in that they display the bigger picture.

In terms of accuracy, the use of computer programmes also comes with their own challenges. One day during the period of data collection, on 9 April 2012, Zesty.ca had a glitch and would not work. While it showed the posts and comments used in the last few hours, it suddenly skipped back to a post back in March and continued to show those posts. This meant that the data captured for that day could not be representative because the programme used to indicate the correct posts to capture would not work. This was a tension between being systematic and accurate, and being representative, an example of how the inherent qualities of Content Analysis can come into conflict.

There were also posts which were contributed on a day of data collection, but the comments continued on through days which were not selected for the sample. This meant that only the parts of the discussion made on the selected day could be used, while the rest of the discussion had to be discarded. A post could have been made on a day on which data would not be collected, while the comments might have picked up on a day of collection. These discussions also had to be left out

from the study in order for the sample to remain standard and collection to be systematic. Again this is an example indicating a tension between being representative and being meticulous.

All the above-mentioned tensions illustrate the difficulty in applying this method to the online environment. Doing the data capturing manually was also a tedious process because of the massive amounts thereof, which was intensified by the fact that the data was only available for collection for short periods. These were the challenges that were faced in applying content analysis as the methodology for this study. It is hoped that thesis contributes in some way, to the development and advancement of the methodology.

**Word Count: 24 850**

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