The Limits and Possibilities of Virtual Political Communication in Transforming South Africa: A Case Study of *ANC Today* and *SA Today*

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Abstract

Eleven years into democracy, South Africa is engaged in fierce debate about the nature and pace of the transformation project. At various levels of social and political communication, issues relating to racism, unemployment, foreign policy and affirmative action, among others, remain topical. The launch of *ANC Today*[1] weekly online journal in 2001 followed by the official opposition Democratic Alliance (DA)'s *SA Today* two years later, added impetus to the debate. This paper discusses the potential and limitations of the two online journals, in particular their weekly flagship "letter from the President" columns as sites for virtual political interaction between party leadership and the citizens. Using Habermas's concept of the "public sphere" as an analytic category, the paper concludes that although the two websites reflect an attempt to broaden the platforms for political communication by the two political parties, they largely remain linear, exclusive and lack a participatory character.

Theorising the Internet and the Public Sphere

As has been the case with any new medium, the arrival of the Internet in the early 1990s created debate about its impact on society, in particular its capacity to provide a critical-rational realm for citizen participation (public sphere) and in the process revitalise the relationship between citizens and politics (see Croteau & Hoynes, 2003). Quite unlike its predecessors such as radio and television, the Internet, thanks to its interactivity, contains a huge capacity for public participation. Both globally and in Africa, the debate about the Internet and its public sphere potential has been framed in two ways. The one camp of "cyber optimists" celebrate both the interactive capacity of the Internet and the almost limitless information available via the Internet as having "the potential to allow the public to become knowledgeable about public affairs, more articulate in expressing their views via email…and more active in mobilising around community affairs" (Norris, 2001: 97).

The contending camp of "cyber sceptics" argues that the Internet may fail to transform the existing patterns of citizens' democratic participation. This camp argues, among others, that as happened with other mediums before it, the Internet in particular and digital technologies in general will be subjected to the same dominance—through both ownership and control—by the same corporate and political hierarchies. McChesney (2000) argues that

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[1] *ANC Today* is the online journal of the African National Congress, South Africa's ruling party.

whereas the Internet's interactive decentralised structure has not lent itself to existing regulatory models as such and could potentially reconfigure the way citizens participate in democratic life, the medium's "much-ballyhooed 'openness' to the extent that it becomes a viable mass medium" was a myth because it was likely to be dominated by usual corporate suspects (p. 183).

Despite their obvious differences, both "cyber optimists" and their sceptical colleagues seem to agree that the Internet does have the *potential* to enhance participatory democracy. Norris (2001) argues that the Internet "*may* broaden involvement in public life by eroding some of the barriers to political participation and civic engagement, especially for many groups currently marginalised from mainstream politics" (p.97, emphasis mine). The issue that's been up for debate therefore has been how the Internet's potential can be realised in the interest of democracy and democratisation in different contexts and cultures.

Norris (2001) advances a model of a virtual political system in which citizens exercise influence over policy output through their continued interaction with civil society groups and arms of the state. The model (illustrated on Figure 1) is based on a functioning democracy where virtual politics "will mirror the traditional political system, so that there will be far more opportunities for civic deliberation and public debate, for group mobilisation and party activism on the Internet in established democracies … than in authoritarian regimes that suppress dissident voices" (p.107). The importance of Norris's model is that it places the Internet and its role or potential role as a site of participatory democracy in the context of a given society's political system. The Internet is therefore viewed not as operating outside society and as having a revolutionalising effect, but as a technological facility that exists in political (and cultural-economic) milieus which fashion its use. What emerges from this analysis is a conception of the Internet as potentially reformist rather than a revolutionary phenomenon in democratic participation.

Schneider (1997) identifies four dimensions which are necessary for the development of an idealised public sphere within the context of the Internet. The first dimension is equality, which relates to the removal of barriers to participation such as lack of equipment as well as competence in communicative skills. The second dimension is diversity, which relates to the range of topics under discussion. Diversity also has to do with the inclusion of a range of opinions across the spectrum of particular subjects or topics under discussion. Reciprocity, or the inclusion of the views of others participating in the debate, is identified as the third critical dimension to the development of a virtual public sphere. The fourth dimension is quality of debate. This has to be viewed in light of Habermas's notion of "critical-rational" debate.

Although this framework for analysing the role of the Internet in relation to the public sphere has been criticised for the way the four concepts have been operationalised (including the use of quantitative methods to measure the quality of a debate) (see Jankowski & van Selm, 2000), it arguably remains a crucial starting point in the study of the role and influence of the Internet in both developing and developed countries. My analysis of the South African case applies these factors as analytic categories.
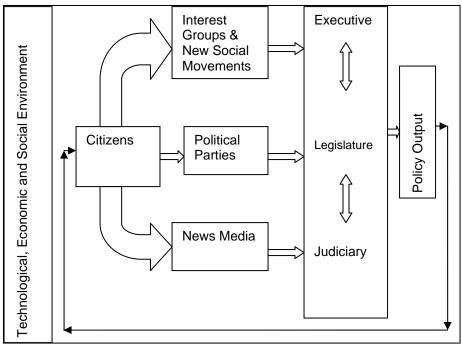
Figure 1.1. *The virtual political system.*

The Internet in Transforming South Africa

Although South Africa fares much better compared with most African countries in terms of Internet connectivity and access by the public, the medium is still far from becoming a "mass" medium (Leslie, 2002; Berger, 2004; Lesame, 2005). In a population of 47 million, only 3.5 million South Africans have access to the Internet, which translates into about 7.4 percent (Goldstuck Report, 2004). The reasons for this include, among others, the high costs of getting connected and sustaining a continued subscription, as well as poverty and illiteracy (According to Lesame (2005), 17.9 percent of South Africans over 20 years have had no schooling). Related to the question of illiteracy is the fact that access to virtual participation is also constrained by the predominant use of English as the language for "national debate". Both the DA and ANC websites, for example, are in English.[2]

Although access to traditional mass media such as radio and television is much higher, there is, besides the Internet, also limited access to mainstream newspapers, which normally play host to follow-up debates on issues raised in the Internet sites of the two political parties under review. In a country emerging from a past defined by legislated racial segregation, factors of race and gender also define access to the virtual public sphere. Generally black people and women have limited participation not just on the public sphere but also in the mainstream economy.

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[2] According to the DA's webmaster, Niki McQueen, articles on the website can be made available in all 11 official languages only on request. The ANC website has sections in local languages other than English, but the flagship *ANC Today* is in English only.

The issue of access in the South African context, constrained by both the limited availability of hardware, software, skills and competence, as well as costs of getting connected, give credence to the argument that the new digital technologies "connect the connected more than the peripheral" (Norris, 2001: 95). It can be argued that although the texture of the virtual "national debate" hosted in the two political parties' websites reflects a diversity of competing perspectives, access to and participation in these debates remains a preserve of key opinion makers in the country's centres of power. Given that both websites and their leaders' weekly online letters emerged as part of a tussle over control of the political public sphere in transforming South Africa, it is important to briefly explore aspects of the transition itself that among other things render control of the discourse politically vital.

In 2004, South Africa celebrated its first decade of non-racial democracy after half a century of apartheid and three centuries of colonial domination. With a constitution often cited as the most liberal in the world, South Africa enjoys among others, the freedoms of expression and the press. While the country's economy and governance are highly ranked both on the continent and globally, there is in South Africa a great degree of debate about the nature and pace of the transformation process. Some of the key issues in what can be described as "national debate" in contemporary South Africa include the failure of the economy to slow the rate of poverty, the slow pace of land reform, the increasing gap between the rich and poor (South Africa is the third most unequal society on earth, after Guatemala and Brazil), continued racial tensions, crime, as well as the policy of black economic empowerment. There is also intense debate about the country's foreign policy, especially President Thabo Mbeki's "quiet diplomacy" approach to crisis-ridden Zimbabwe, the country's Northern neighbour and biggest trading partner in Africa.

Much of the debate about issues in the transition is mediated by the mainstream press, and often pitches the state against sections of civil society, sometimes business, as well as opposition parties. In a transforming society where public discourse is contested, the media, including the Internet are likely to be used for hegemony-construction by the different centres of power. But the same media can also be used by citizens for contesting this hegemony.

The *ANC Today*: Background

The website *ANC Today* (http://www.anc.org.za) made its debut appearance on 26 January 2001 as an attempt by the ANC to both articulate party (and government) policy, as well as to provide a mediated 'defence' for the party in a context where the mainstream means of communication were allegedly skewed in favour of the political opposition and capital. Writing in the launch issue of the journal, President Thabo Mbeki argued that South Africa was faced with "a virtually unique situation" where "the overwhelmingly dominant tendency in South Africa politics, represented by the ANC, (has) no representation whatsoever in the mass media" (*ANC Today,* Vol. 1, No.1, 2001). The president argued that, because of the nature of the media, what passed for public opinion in the country was in fact "minority opinion informed by the historic social and political position occupied by this minority" (ibid). In one of his later online letters President Mbeki accused this media of being "fishers of corrupt men" who only targeted black politicians and businessmen (*ANC Today*, Volume 3, No. 21, 30 May 2003)**.**

The ANC online journal was therefore launched with the aim of creating—quite ironically for a ruling party—an alternative public sphere where national debate could perhaps mainstream the views of the majority in the country's fledgling democracy. In his weekly

letter, President Mbeki has written extensively about issues raised above that are part of the national debate. In some cases he has written in defence of government and party policy, while in others he has gone on the offensive, challenging his critiques on one or more aspects of this debate.

Since its launch, the website, which identifies itself as "the online voice of the ANC," has drawn profound interest from the mainstream newspapers, which almost on a weekly basis carry stories based on the President's instalment. It has also drawn responses from the opposition, civil society and mainstream business circles. Besides *ANC Today,* the ANC website also provides hyperlinks to other sites related to the ruling coalition as well as the party's other quarterly publication *Umrabulo.* The title of this quarterly journal was derived from a word used to inspire political discussion and debate on Robben Island prison, where political prisoners were incarcerated during the apartheid era.

The Letter from the President

This paper focuses on *ANC Today's* "Letter from the President" for the month of April 2004. In particular it looks at the nature of the issues raised as part of national debate, how they are framed, and as much as possible locate these issues in their context in South African politics. The letters dealt with issues around which the ANC campaigned at the elections, namely job creation, reduction of poverty, crime, disease and improved government service delivery. This was captured in the party's campaign slogan: "A people's contract for a better South Africa."

The President's letters were generally quite lengthy, and tended to explain the current government's developmental efforts in the context of the legacy of apartheid. In all the four letters analysed, the president made the occasional journey back to the apartheid past, reminding his readers of the pains of the ANC-led liberation struggle, and assuring them the people's 'movement' would deliver on its promises if given another term in office.

The President made reference to "our people" 51 times and "the people" 48 times in the four letters analysed. These "people" are presented as masses standing in full support of the ANC in its continuing "democratic revolution." The idea of the South African transition being a revolution is a constant motif in the letters. They make occasional reference to an ANC-led "democratic revolution" that ushered in the new South Africa (see, Vol, 4, No. 17; Vol, 4, No 15). It is important however to note that the definition of the negotiated transition as "revolutionary" has been a subject of contestation within the South African public realm. Scholars such as Alexander (2002), Marais (1998), and Bell & Ntsebeza (2001), among others, have questioned the revolutionary character of a negotiated transition which has ensured a great deal of continuity from the past for many key institutions, including the economy. Within the ANC and its alliance partners, the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), the debate rages over the direction of state economic policy which the more leftwing elements of the tripartite ruling alliance argue is tailored for the benefit of the chosen few, more-or-less similar to the apartheid economy.

As Figure 2 shows, the issues that dominated both the *ANC Today* and *SA Today* President's letters included HIV/AIDS, Zimbabwe, poverty and employment as well as crime. The *ANC Today* letters stressed the central role of the state as an agency of national development and assumed a pan-African 'solidarity' approach in relation to the Zimbabwean crisis. This was in contrast to the DA letter which argued for a lesser state role in the economy and an aggressive foreign policy especially on Zimbabwe. The DA leader's letters also argued

for a lowering of restrictions or barriers to doing business in South Africa, and consistently presented the private sector as the major driver of national development and job creation.

Figure 2: Issues under discussion in the two websites

Issue-related word/s	Appearance/s on ANC Website	Appearance/s on DA Website
Crime	8	8
HIV/AIDS	2	6
Zimbabwe	1	12
Poverty	24	6
Employment	4	4

The President's letters often invoked the picture of patriotic masses standing by their movement against both the local opposition and a coterie of (mainly Western) Afro-pessimists whose criticism of the party was inspired by either racism or the urge to divide society. The ANC was portrayed as the custodian of the truth while the opposition was depicted as peddlers of falsehoods.

Words used to describe or refer to the opposition and critics of the ANC include "lies" (30/4/04), "dishonest views" (16/04/04), "false claims" (16/04/04), "treacherous arguments" (16/04/04) and "dismal vision" (09/04/04). It is also interesting to note that the internal political opposition within the party was in most cases bundled together with any criticism of the ANC from any other quarters, both local and foreign.

Although when the opposition parties DA and the Inkhata Freedom Party (IFP) were identified in the letters, in the majority of cases ANC critics and the opposition were identified by the impersonal term, "some in our country." This term has been used in other letters outside the scope of this paper to refer to a critical media, sections of civil society and business as well.

The letters consistently presented the dichotomous picture of a truthful ruling party and a fallacious-driven opposition locked in some kind of mortal combat for the hearts and minds of the "masses of our people." In the 16-22 April 2004 issue, the President wrote that by voting the ANC into power, the people had "spoken loudly and said they have understood the truths the ANC has communicated to them, and understood the falsehoods that others have told." In the same issue, the President argued that by voting for the ruling party the people had voted for national unity, while simultaneously voting against the perpetuation of the racial and ethnic divisions of the past symbolised by the opposition. The opposition was identified with those who attempted to "persuade them (voters) that they belong to separate compartments, with competing interests" (Vol.4, No.15).

The DA Website

The DA leader Tony Leon's weekly letter, *SA Today* was launched on 28 February 2003, as an answer to President Mbeki's letter in *ANC Today.* The title of the DA leader's letter suggests a national, rather than a political party perspective, unlike President Mbeki's letter. Like the ANC President's letter, Tony Leon's weekly letter is also on the party's website, which has a variety of other offerings and other mediums. The letter is also dispatched to a mailing list of 900 recipients, including national and international journalists and party members. According to the website's administrator, the DA website has received

substantial hits since its launch in March 2002 (a total of 10 million), with an average of 8617 hits per day. During the election season in March-April 2004, the site claims to have played host to over 2 million hits.[3]

The letter *SA Today* shares President Mbeki's combative approach to the debate about the transition in South Africa. However, an interesting difference to their approach to electoral debate in April 2004 is that whereas the ANC president tapped into the past liberation struggle for inspiration for managing the present and the future, the DA president drew into the ANC's shortcomings in the present, and sought to make political capital out of this as a way of projecting its promises for the future. Where the ANC President saw the legacy of apartheid and colonialism as too entrenched to be swiftly eradicated in the space of a decade, the DA saw an incompetent ruling party blaming everything and everyone else for its failure to run the country efficiently. In this case, the opposition projected itself as a more competent government-in-waiting.

Where the ANC President viewed the impending elections as an opportunity for the electorate to vote for a "people's contract" forged in the crucible of decades of anti-colonial struggle, the DA saw the electoral contest in terms of a "final push" that would see South Africans ejecting the ANC out of power, on account of the party's deficient present (02/04/04). The DA leader's letters emphasised the party's elaborate campaign programme and its claims to national support was based both on its agenda for development and on the fact that the party had "delivered [its] promise of strong opposition to the ANC" (02/04/04). On the latter, the opposition party implored the electorate to give it a renewed mandate so that it could "keep South Africa and democracy safe from ANC domination" (06/04/04). By its very presence, the opposition viewed its political place as stopping the possibility of an ANC-led one-party state in the country.

The major differences between the two parties also lay in their broad visions for managing the transition in the country. The DA entered the electoral ring with the promise of an increased police force that would swiftly stem crime, introducing a more flexible labour law regime to allow employers to hire and fire without confronting a tough bureaucracy, an aggressive foreign policy especially on Zimbabwe (including the adoption of smart sanctions) and creating macro-economic conditions that would "unleash the private sector" (06/04/2004).

In his letter entitled "Ten reasons for South Africans to vote against Thabo Mbeki on 14 April" (06/04/04) the DA leader cited among others Mbeki's support for Zimbabwean leader Robert Mugabe, his "denialism" with regards to HIV/AIDS, his occasional playing of the "race card" whenever criticised, and his pardoning of hardcore criminals on the basis of their previous contribution to the anti-apartheid struggle as reasons for the electorate to dump Mbeki at the polls. Mbeki was also criticised for implementing an aggressive and "race-inspired" black economic empowerment programme that divided society into black and white. A major difference between the two parties' approach to the subject of transformation was that the opposition called for what it called "meritocracy" in the appointment of staff and procurement of services, while in broad general terms the ANC argued for an affirmative action programme in both cases to allow enhanced participation of previously disadvantaged races in the mainstream economy.

The ANC/DA Online Letters: Virtual Public Spheres?

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[3] According to the www.da.org.za webmaster Niki McQueen (08/06/2005)

Unlike blogs or Usenet newsgroups, the two websites operate as an extension of conventional linear political communication. Their public sphere potential can therefore only be assessed in terms of existing, non-computer-mediated structures of democratic participation within the concerned political parties. The leadership of the ANC and government, for example, occasionally holds interactive meetings called *imbizos* with grassroots supporters in different parts of the country. Although they are limited in terms of time and public participation, the party argues that these are an effective way of encouraging bottom-up interaction. The opposition also holds occasional rallies and leaders' walkabouts in selected areas, presenting opportunities for interaction with the membership. What is not clear however, is the extent to which the online discussions by the leaders are an expression of the majority of their political constituencies in line with the practice of representative democracy.

In terms of the quality of the debate (see earlier reference to Schneider, 1997), it could be argued that most of the issues raised in the leaders' letters are topical and part of the critical national discourse. Issues such as crime, HIV/AIDS, employment and racism relate closely to the majority of the electorate. Both leaders expound the positions their parties have taken in relation to the contentious issues discussed. It is unclear, however, whether the perspectives reflected in the letters on same issues reflect the diversity of views on the same issues at intraparty levels. There has been, for example, fierce debate within the ANC alliance about the South Africa's "quiet diplomacy" on Zimbabwe. Some constituencies within the alliance, principally Cosatu and the SACP, have called for a more aggressive approach, almost in convergence with the DA. However, the party leaders' online letters do not reflect this diversity. They present ready-made answers to complex issues, and both leaders tend to define themselves in relation to the faulty *other*.

Conclusion

Not withstanding the fact that they raise issues that are central to the national debate, the weekly online letters by the two leaders do not as yet constitute an accessible, participatory public sphere for the articulation of national debate in transforming South Africa, not least because they do not even have feedback facilities. Although their parent websites do have provisions for feedback, there is no evidence to suggest that any diverse input from the readers is incorporated in the letters. In the case of the ANC website, one is not certain whether the feedback facility is actually functional, given that this writer sent inquiries at least three times in one month and received no feedback at all from the editor/webmaster.

As they stand, the two online letters could arguably pass for what Habermas (1989) refers to as "representative publicity" where leaders parade themselves in front of their subjects and lecture to them about various issues and programmes. Although, as raised in this discussion, both letters raise critical issues that are part of the contested national discourse, they are simply an online version of traditional, pre-Internet political communication. The Internet's interactive capacity is therefore yet to be fully utilised by the parties. Given that South Africa is a transforming society where the national agenda is occasionally contested, possibilities exist for both groups in civil society or even the state to harness the interactive capacity of the Internet to enhance democratic participation. The context of a strong growing economy, a democratic government and a good constitution, renders such possibilities even more achievable.

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