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Digital Political Literacy? How Three Community-Based Organisations in Inner-City Johannesburg Miss the Mark on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Social media has been highlighted as a tool for social justice organisations to access networks, increase their visibility and thereby increase their power. However, using social media platforms for political ends requires both technical skills and political know-how. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's (1983. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press) concepts of desire and desiring-machines, this study used participatory action research, ethnographic observation, and content analysis to explore how three community-based organizations in central Johannesburg used social media to further their political aims. The study revealed that low digital political literacy hampered their political impact, notwithstanding access to technical skills, fluent English, and regular data access. Their social media posts noticeably failed to elicit interaction or to build their networks; instead, they experience similar exclusion and inequality as in the offline world.

KEYWORDS

political communication;
social media; community-
based organizations; inner-
city Johannesburg

Introduction

In South Africa, social media platforms have become key sites for participating in social-political life and for contestations of power (Mare 2014). Given that social media platforms are available to anyone with the data to connect, both individuals and organizations can easily use them for political communication. This ease contrasts markedly with formal access to the political domain. Whereas South African legislation explicitly places civic participation at the centre of political life, South African community-based organisations (CBOs) have had little success in the participatory forums created by the government, or in accessing the government through petition and protest (Wafer and Oldfield 2015). In this vacuum, social media could potentially function as a space for “publicly” engaging government actors in innovative ways, as well as to network and connect and interact with partner organisations, members and new members (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela 2012). In other words, improved communication could support CBOs to grow their political power.

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However, this paper argues that the transformative possibilities of social media depend on the users' digital *political* literacy, that is, the ability to increase organizational political power by engaging in online political communication. Using case studies of three inner-city Johannesburg CBOs, I identify the limitations of and gaps in their social media practices, which lead to their limited online political efficacy.

CBOs are geographically located organizations that work to bring about local change (Bosch 2003); they are also defined as "any organization that has a distinct mission to provide specialized services to a defined population" (Anderson 2010, 20). For example, CBOs can include *inter alia* suburban ratepayers, organisations run by community health workers, those tackling gender inequality and violence, or those fighting for improved service delivery. The three CBOs in this study all respond in some way to the politics of inner-city Johannesburg, discussed in the context below.

Context

History and politics in Johannesburg's inner city

Inner-city Johannesburg has often been a site of political contestation in South Africa, albeit the dynamics of contestation and actors have changed over time (Mbembe and Nuttall 2008; Wilhelm-Solomon 2016). Early contestations were about race, but after the apartheid government made way for "grey areas" where black and white people could live together, white people and formal businesses fled to Johannesburg's northern suburbs (Du Plessis and Wilson 2005). By the end of apartheid, because the inner city had been emptied of capital, many buildings were no longer being maintained and unemployment escalated. The ANC-led post-apartheid city government tried to position itself as tackling poverty (Didier, Morange, and Peyroux 2013), but also attempted to reposition the inner city to attract investors, which often meant evicting tenants from "bad buildings" and justifying its actions with the language of "crime and grime" (Ah Goo 2017, 2018). Nevertheless, as fast as big business moved out, street traders moved in, and the inner city became the hub of informal trade, even as the city government tried to halt the influx of traders by forcible removal, confiscating goods, and limiting traders to designated areas (McMichael 2015). Further, with the end of apartheid, African war refugees and economic migrants came to seek a better life in Johannesburg (Nyström 2012). But xenophobia was also on the rise, leading to looting of foreign-owned shops and trading stalls, and attacks on and murders of foreign nationals (Bekker 2015).

In these political conditions, the three CBOs in this study emerged: since 2002, Group for Refugees Without Voice (GRWV) has sought to protect foreign nationals, educate them about their rights, and facilitate their access to services; from 2005, the Inner City Resource Centre (ICRC) has worked to prevent evictions and call for decent housing for all; and from 2007, One Voice for All Hawkers (One Voice) sought to protect traders and improve their working conditions. The explicit political aims of the three CBOs are to support the most vulnerable groups in society, but to preferably do so by collaborating with the government.

By the time this research was undertaken, the City of Johannesburg was under Mayor Herman Mashaba of the Democratic Alliance, but key political policies did not change. For example no new housing policies or street trade policies were developed; however, Mashaba made various pronouncements that created more hostility towards foreign

nationals living in Johannesburg (Mashego and Malefane 2016). He also lashed out at human rights organizations for “thwarting his efforts to resolve the city’s housing crisis” (Mathope 2017, ll. 3–4). This paper looks at how the three CBOs responded on their digital platforms. However, the digital footprint of the CBOs is first considered in the context of digital political literacy in South Africa, briefly discussed below.

The politics of social media in South Africa

In Southern Africa, even when internet penetration is low, social media has enabled cyber-activism and encouraged civic engagement by aiding mobilisation and political organizing; it has also promoted “new forms of citizen journalism” that allow ordinary citizens to document their own realities and express themselves (Mare 2014, 323). Despite the prevalent use of social media in South Africa, and despite citizens engaging in political discussion on social media platforms, many political forces are not fully using the opportunities these platforms afford. For example, even South African political parties are not using the platforms to create or participate in political discussions online (Steenkamp and Hyde-Clarke 2014, 97).

Instead, some of the strongest South African political campaigns include student movement-generated the hashtag #FeesMustFall (Frassinelli 2018); hashtags generated by women, such as #MenAreTrash (Reneses and Bosch 2023); and others partly driven by political party-aligned groups, for example, #ZumaMustFall; #PayBackTheMoney (Frazao 2017; van der Vyver 2017), or even driven by public relations companies deploying “Twitter bots”/“propaganda bots”,¹ as in the case of #WhiteMonopolyCapital (Beresford et al. 2023). Some of the hashtags are linked to political success beyond the digital terrain. For example, #FeesMustFall led to changes in how the government provides bursaries to disadvantaged students. #ZumaMust Fall and #PayBackTheMoney generated negative publicity around then-President Jacob Zuma, ultimately forcing him to resign and pay back some of the money spent on his Nkandla home. The campaigns show a high-level political digital literacy, including intertextuality with the use of “must fall” hashtags (Bosch 2021) and the deployment of bots. However, such digital political acuity has been elite-driven by communication professionals, middle-class activists, educational elites attending university, political party leaders and their PR companies. Much less is known about how CBOs are using digital tools.

Previous studies of social media use by South African civil society organizations (CSOs)—especially CBOs—are scarce. A 2015 study which documented the self-reported use of social media by non-governmental organization (NGO) staff, CBO leaders, and social movement leaders found that only well-resourced NGOs deployed digital technologies for political communication (Bosch et al. 2019; Bosch, Wasserman, and Chuma 2018). Bosch, Wasserman, and Chuma (2018), Chiumbu (2015) and Mdlalose (2014) also pointed out that even when South African grassroots organizations use digital technologies, most members are excluded from message-making, because aligned middle-class activists have more know-how and easier access these platforms. For example, in the case of the Anti-Eviction Campaign and Abahlali baseMjondolo, website content was reportedly mostly controlled by white middle-class activists, who disseminated

¹Artificial intelligence software deployed to send propaganda messages to create the impression of the message having more support (Grimme et al. 2017; Woolley 2016).

ideological messages that were of no concern to rank-and-file members. Another example of a social media campaign by a South African CBO is Reclaim the City (@ReclaimCT), which aims to address spatial inequity in Cape Town by occupying buildings and rumbolling up support on social media. Its social media platform has arguably been used for “choreographing protest—giving information about where to go—crowd formation—and documenting the activities of the participants” (Gwaze et al. 2018, 18). However, in 2016 the online campaign was being run by Ndifuna Ukwazi’s professional head of communications (Hirsch 2016) (who is now a journalist).

The role elites have played in generating online political content leads to the question of whether CBOs that do not include educated elite in their office bearers or membership have the level of digital political literacy to build power to address the concerns of their communities. The case studies below help to shed some light on this question.

Theoretical framework

Much political communication research focuses either on “tool use” (e.g. ICTs, social media or nanomedia) or various forms of content analysis of the messages. However, these studies tend to focus on the static elements of communication, rather than the flows of communication within a specific context. To understand political communication in context, I draw on Deleuze and Guattari’s (1983, 2004) and Latour’s (2005) theories that the natural, social and political world are made up of assemblages or “desiring-machines”, which generate creative or destructive flows. Assemblages are created through connections between things: a river assemblage, for example, consists of *inter alia* the connections between the water and the land through which it runs as well as the animals and machines that use it (such as fish and boats). In the model, developed based on my experience as a communications practitioner and activist, CBO political communication can be regarded as a “machinic” assemblage with different components, some of which are geared towards generating flows to build political power within the CBO and some of which seek to extend power beyond the CBO to influence some aspect of the outside world. Components relevant to the organizational political communication assemblage are depicted in Figure 1, including the organizations’ political desires, the framing of their messages, the aesthetics used, the tools employed and the audiences they try to reach. Depending on how each component is deployed, the machine can generate greater or lesser flows of communication and greater or lesser power for each CBO as they effect change in the sociopolitical world.

In this assemblage, in Deleuze and Guattari’s (1983) terms, “desire” is a productive, passionate creative force driving people to make connections. If effectively deployed, it generates “lines of flight” by which to escape oppressive social and political conditions (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 3). In considering CBO political communication, then, desire is the driving force behind each CBO’s attempts to communicate with other political stakeholders to gain power and influence in the social-political terrain and forge a way out of the current milieu. However, neither desire nor the machine is stable; instead, the flows produced may charge forward suddenly, toyi-toyi joyfully or militantly, split off in different directions, or meander somewhat directionless over time.

In this paper, I focus on the “tools”—specifically the digital tools—used by the three CBOs, asking: What are they using the tools for? How does their use advance their political

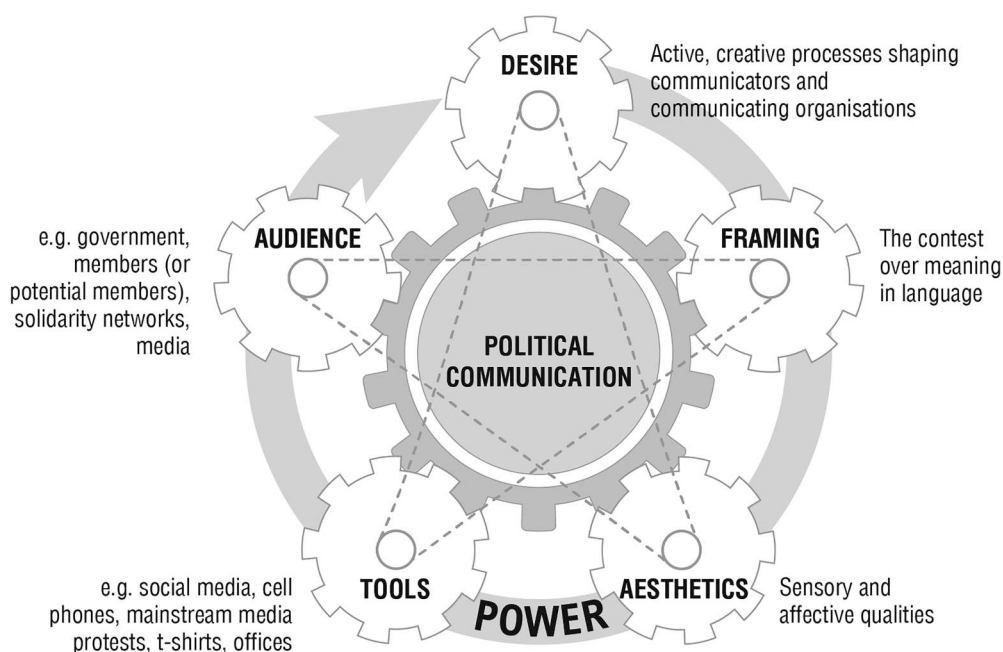


Figure 1. The political communication machine.

agenda (if at all)? Driven by desire, how are digital tools used to frame messages (engage in political contests and persuade audiences) and deploy aesthetics (to create sensory and affective impacts), and what audiences do these messages reach (e.g. members, the media, solidarity networks, political opponents, or layers of government)? Further, because communication is dynamic, I looked at the interaction between these components, especially audience interaction with the messages, and organizational interaction with audiences or potential audiences.

The paper also examines which (if any) interactive techniques the three CBOs used on social media to gain political influence and power, such as “publicly following a political figure, posting written comments for other people, commenting on others’ posts, and forwarding political news, with or without commentary and social endorsement” (Theocharis et al. 2023, 791). Key methods for eliciting interaction include, creating or using existing hashtags so that audiences can find relevant content; tagging other users (such as journalists) to draw attention to posts; and sharing and commenting on the posts of others to promote your social media presence. Directing critical posts at political elites can also draw attention to a social media account, but this should only be used judiciously as such posts may “leave limited space or tolerance for counter-scripts” (Hendriks, Duus, and Ercan 2016, 1102).

Using social media tools for political effect depends not only on proficiency in the technical aspects (i.e. how to use a particular platform to make a post or respond to the posts of others), or an ability to speak English, but also on the political skills for attracting and persuading social media audiences to interact with and share political messages, and hopefully support political activities. Therefore, in this study, digital political literacy is defined as the ability of political actors to use online platforms, framing, and aesthetics to interact with audiences to reshape the political terrain.

Literature review: digital literacy in the global political terrain

Digital literacy, especially using social media, has been underscored as a vehicle for social change, creating new, transformative possibilities for political communication by civil society groups, such as social justice organizations (Castells 2015). A key advantage of social media over previous mass communication technologies is the possibility for users to interact more closely than allowed by other mediums—including interaction with elites (Ariel and Avidar 2015). The possibilities for interacting on an international level also mean that social movements in one country can sometimes gain support in other countries (Klischewski 2014).

Apart from social movements, international development agencies that support CSO participation have tried to boost CSO capacity to communicate with local elites (Servaes and Malikhao 2016). In the early 2000s, development agencies focused on the role of ICTs in social change by providing CBOs and NGOs with ICT equipment and/or training in the belief that these would increase NGO and CBO access to political elites and other development stakeholders. However, the interventions were typically technocentric and ignored how power relations within CSOs determine who has access to the equipment and who receives training, hence, training and equipment do not necessarily shift power relations (Radovanović et al. 2020; Servaes and Hoyng 2017). Further, those who do receive training and/or equipment usually only acquire technical skills and do not learn how to integrate production into their social and political practices, limiting the extent to which ICTs can empower CSOs (Walsh 2014). With respect to online spaces, the extent to which the internet is Anglo-centric confines global political conversations to geographic and linguistic zones (Hadland and Dongwon 2008; Hardt 2008). However, even those who speak fluent English may not know how to generate power using these tools, especially if they are unclear about how power works.

Alongside the development sector's interest in ICTs for development, they often promoted "Evidence-Based Policymaking" (EBPM; Ham, Hunter, and Robinson 1995). EBPM theory assumes that if CSOs present evidence about their challenges and possible solutions, policymakers will address them by making fact-based policies. However, EBPM theory ignored that policymaking is more influenced by political positions, power and values than by evidence (Pointer 2014). Thus, even when using ICT training and equipment to present evidence, CSOs often failed to influence politicians and policymakers.

Therefore, in this study, to establish the three CBOs' levels of political efficacy using social media tools, I explored the flows of communication among CBO members, their communities, and other audiences using social media platforms. Specifically, the study assessed whether social media tools extend the CBOs range and ability to engage in political life and shift power relations.

Methodology

This paper is based on research with three purposively chosen CBOs that tackle key political issues in inner-city Johannesburg. The study triangulates participatory action research, ethnographic observation, and content analysis. For the participatory action research, the three CBOs participated in three workshops over the course of 18 months; on the one hand, the workshop participants provided data for this study, and

on the other hand, insofar as I informed and engaged them about the components of political communication, the participants also learnt about how to advance their own political communication. The workshops used the political communication model identified in [Figure 1](#) to identify the CBOs' own political communication strategies and compare them to those of political elites (especially the City of Johannesburg and the mayor). During the workshops, participants created songs, made collages, and took notes in English on newsprint, and these became the basis of analysis.

For ethnographic observation, I visited the offices of each CBO to understand how they went about their work, and also attended events with CBO members. The key observations were related to their use of ICTs, especially the different devices (mobile phones, smartphones, computers) and apps used (WhatsApp, phone calls, email, Facebook, Twitter, and SMSes). The ethnographic and workshop data was collected between September 2018 and June 2019.

For the content analysis, I examined (i) the CBOs' Facebook statuses and engagement with Facebook audiences, and (ii) the content of the CBOs' tweets, using frame analysis for written texts and critical visual analysis for the images—paying attention to aesthetics and affect. All social media posts made up until December 2019 were included in the study.

The different data sets were triangulated to identify commonalities and divergences; for example, was the social media use reported by the CBOs in the workshop similar to that which I identified through ethnographic observation?

All participants signed an ethics form, which was explained to them in detail; the office bearers of each CBO gave permission for social media data to be analysed.

Findings

In this section, I outline how each of the CBOs' organizational desires fuel political communication in terms of the theoretical model in [Figure 1](#). I briefly touch on their overarching political communication practices and then focus on their social media activities; for example, in what ways their messaging is adapted to the social media terrain and whether messaging on social media platforms allows for interactivity. Although three methods were used to collect data, I do not discuss the findings from each method, but rather—for brevity—present integrated findings for each CBO.

Inner City Resource Centre

ICRC tackles issues around inner-city housing. Of the three CBOs, it has the most stable structure, with office facilities, office equipment (including computers), funding, committee members and staff. Most staff members had only high school education, but one, a law student, provided paralegal assistance to members. The ICRC expressed strong desires, in that its stable funding base sustained focussed political strategizing, communication and activities over many years. Its activities have prevented the city government from evicting inner-city building residents and helped some residents to access water and electricity.

ICRC has won several Constitutional Court cases preventing the City of Johannesburg from evicting people without due process and without providing alternative

accommodation. It had frequently taken part in consultations with the city government around the inner-city housing development and was an active member in the Johannesburg Inner City Partnership (JICP)—a conglomerate of government, civil society and private-sector groups with an interest in inner-city development—until the election of Mayor Mashaba, who expelled them from JICP meetings and refused to engage with them on any matters related to inner-city housing. Nevertheless, the passion of ICRC meant they did not give up, constantly phoning the mayor's office to ask for responses to petitions and memorandums, marching to the mayor's office, and working with law NGOs to prevent evictions. At the same time, regular meetings and workshops within and across residential buildings kept members up-to-date and involved. Through an assemblage of the passion of its office bearers, the practical tools for engagement, and deliberate political activities, the flow of desire led to significant political organizing and communication.

Its framing of messages has shifted over time in response to political changes: in the early to mid 2000s it used a poverty frame to attract members and evoke sympathy from political elites; it continues to use this frame for fundraising. From the late 2000s through to 2014, it mostly relied on a rights frame, calling on the legal system to protect inner-city residents from eviction. However, from 2014 onwards rights language was gradually dropped because it was pushing ICRC in the direction of ad-hoc cases, rather than solidarity building. Instead, they started using an economic frame about "affordable housing for all". Also, in response to the government's "crime and grime" frame mentioned above, from 2016 onwards the ICRC deployed an alternative "crime and grime" frame; for example, in an image of a press release posted on Facebook and Twitter ahead of a protest march on 14 November 2018 it states:

When water and electricity are cut off, buildings turn into slums because people cannot clean the buildings with no water. Crime also increases in the buildings because they are dark and criminals can lurk there. Mashaba needs to meet with inner city residents to find service delivery solutions.

The change of tack in the political communication shows how the flow of desire shifts and changes, as ICRC strategizes to develop new lines of flight to achieve decent, affordable housing for inner-city residents. Although ICRC was already moving away from the rights frame because it wanted to focus on solidarity, not court cases, Herman Mashaba's comment that human rights' organizations were "thwarting" efforts to improve housing (Mathope 2017, l. 3) resulted in ICRC dropping the frame entirely.

By contrast, ICRC's aesthetic output has been static across time—mostly deployed by members wearing red t-shirts and caps emblazoned with the organizational logo and using red banners at events. However, the aesthetic elements are rarely deployed outside of protest marches (as in [Figure 2](#) posted to Twitter and Facebook) and so does not really "advertise" ICRC on a daily basis. Compared to the shifting lines of flight generated by frames, the stability of aesthetics over time expresses solidarity and links ICRC to many other popular social justice organizations.

In terms of digital presence, ICRC maintained a website for many years, but during my research the site was down, and nobody had the technical skills to revive it (it has since been relaunched). It has a Twitter account, created in November 2015 but with only 18 followers, and a Facebook page, created in June 2014 with 623 followers; it also has



Figure 2. ICRC protest March, 23 June 2014.

several WhatsApp groups for different buildings and for committee members. Although the frames discussed above have been deployed in much of their political messaging, the social media posts rarely contain such frames, except in so far as posting images of the press releases. Instead, their posts were more like a calendar and diary entries—inviting people to upcoming events and sharing short messages and photos after those events. The invitations to upcoming events did include short explanations of what the meeting was about, but only occasionally deployed the frames used elsewhere in their political work. For example, in a Facebook invitation to an event on 3 June 2017, ICRC deploys an economic frame (affordable housing):

Housing Agencies are developing types of accommodation that tend to exclude the low class in the inner-city of Johannesburg due to high rental fees. They are constantly exposed to evictions and no alternative accommodation is always available for them. The ICRC strongly believes that affordable housing is possible for all in the inner-city of Johannesburg. ... Against this background, the ICRC invites you to a mass meeting to develop together new strategies that will attract the COJ to comply and lead us to complete victory.

Albeit ICRC used social media, the invitations did not elicit interactivity; for example, the above post did not invite page followers to give online inputs into the strategy. The limited extent of framing on social media and the lack of engagement indicate that the social media platforms do not strongly form an assemblage to increase the ICRC's political power.

With respect to posts made after events, these mostly provide photographic evidence of the event having taken place. Posting photographs could be an opportunity for ICRC to evoke affective connections through aesthetics, such as photographs of workshop participants speaking passionately or busily engaged in activities. Instead, ICRC typically only posts generic photos of people sitting in rooms (see [Figure 3](#), posted on Facebook). The photographer, an ICRC staff member, said that they take photographs to share with funders as evidence that the workshop took place and was well attended. Therefore, the photos are evidentiary, rather than being taken to elicit solidarity. Posting the photographs on social media is a secondary activity, and captions do not even provide information about what was discussed or decided at the event.

The more interesting photographs are those capturing protest events (see [Figure 2](#) above). Audiences of these photos who are aligned with social justice ideals might feel

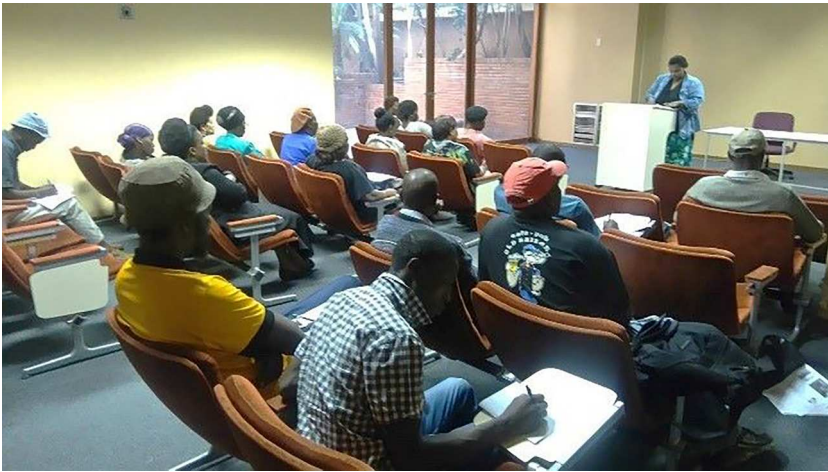


Figure 3. ICRC workshop, May 2016.

stirred into solidarity with ICRC through these images but given that the affective qualities mirror other similar South African protest photographs, the resonance generated is likely to be insufficient to attract new members.

Apart from their own activities, the social media accounts were also not used to make connection with other audiences. For example, none of the messages contained tags to other accounts or popular hashtags; they did not share posts by political elites nor existing or potential partners, and never commented on the posts of others. ICRC also did not use social opportunities to critique politicians. For example, even though they had made many other efforts to contact Mayor Mashaba via other communication means, they did not critique his pronouncements about his proposed model for inner-city housing provision. Alongside the media article cited above, Mashaba further criticized housing rights organizations on Twitter, saying they were holding back development—but again, ICRC did not respond to his assertions.

As such, ICRC used social media as a broadcast medium, with no expectations of a response from the audience and no effort to interact with other accounts. Whereas connecting with an audience on social media can support other efforts to build political power, this is not so of the social media political communication assemblage deployed by the ICRC, because the frames, aesthetics and audiences are not developed on social media. Therefore, social media does not form a line of flight to improve housing conditions in the inner city.

One Voice for all Hawkers

One Voice organizes street traders across Johannesburg, but most of this research took place in the inner city. Although One Voice has stayed united for many years, it has no funds, and only has an empty office (with no furniture or equipment) provided by the Johannesburg Property Company, which manages Johannesburg's trading areas on behalf of the city government. The flow of desire in One Voice is chaotic as it rarely creates its own campaigns, instead aligning with some NGOs and trade union campaigns

in the hope of receiving some crumbs of funding. Most of the time, One Voice languishes, but if the city government attempt any evictions from stalls, office bearers and members move quickly to prevent them, resulting in many loyal, long-standing members. However, One Voice is also riven with conflict, as some members are xenophobic and some anti-xenophobia; and some members want to support “illegal” traders to gain “legal” trading bays, whereas others want to exclude “illegal” traders who they perceive as stealing their trade. Therefore, no clear flow of desire emerges to free members from the unhealthy conditions in their trading zones.

Similarly, One Voice’s framing is unstable and conflict-ridden. However, it has consistently used a poverty frame that is tied to the city’s entrepreneurial frame to underscore the message that they are not like other poor people with begging bowls, but entrepreneurs that the city government should be supporting. This frame has been useful, because even though the city’s support for street trade is unstable, it uses the entrepreneurial frame to motivate the support it does provide. Therefore, this frame alignment has allowed One Voice to sometimes successfully lobby local councillors to provide some facilities, such as stalls with prepaid electricity.

Regarding aesthetics, office-bearers and members regularly wear One Voice t-shirts to show solidarity. Although the t-shirt branding and colours have changed a lot over time—depending on who provided funds to print them—this lack of aesthetic unity did not influence the pride with which they wore the t-shirts. Simply having a t-shirt with the One Voice logo affectively influenced members to maintain camaraderie.

With regard to its online presence, One Voice only has a Facebook page, created in January 2016. Its page logo is very low resolution and uses the acronym OVOAHA, which no organization member used in the course of my ethnographic observation, and which was not contained in any of the material examined for frame analysis, so presents an anomaly (see [Figure 4](#)). Only six posts had been made, three of which were blurry photos. Of the other three posts one lists the services One Voice provides and its needs (resources, funding, and an office); another begins to tell the history of One Voice (evictions prevented and success in acquiring legal trading bays); and the third one lists the Johannesburg areas where it has members. None of this elicits any form of interaction; for example, the post on the history could have asked members to contribute their memories.

One Voice secretary Julekha Latib says that the main reason for having a page is so that outsiders can find them by sending messages on Facebook Messenger—indeed, this is how I contacted One Voice. At the time of this study, many One Voice members did not have smartphones and could not always afford data to stay online, and therefore, even social media platforms like WhatsApp were barely used for organizing. One Voice has also previously been identified as the least literate of traders’ organizations in Johannesburg (Bénit-Gbaffou 2016). Therefore, even if resources had allowed them regular access to online spaces, organizational literacy and the conflict about organizational frames would limit the extent to which it could develop a political communication assemblage. Instead, One Voice is most effective when it engages in direct political action to prevent evictions from licensed trading stalls and to boost access to licensed stalls for “illegal” traders. Social media is not contributing to the flow of desire of the One Voice, nor is it increasing their political power.



Figure 4. Low-resolution photograph used instead of logo on One Voice Facebook page.

Group for Refugees Without Voice

GRWV serves “legal” immigrants in inner-city Johannesburg, i.e. refugees entitled to asylum, not “economic migrants”. During this research, GRWV’s office was a room in the house rented by Chairperson Crispin Kashindi. Its desire is not easily observed, because GRWV is unclear on how best to support “legal” immigrants, and is highly patriarchal—with all-male leadership, even though most people seeking support are women. It also creates hierarchical relationships between those seeking help and the GRWV office-bearers, who present themselves as authoritative. GRWV also only undertakes activities for which it has secured donor funding—even though funding is sparse; its activities are therefore irregular. When donors provide money, the main work is “awareness raising campaigns” to inform refugees and asylum seekers about their rights under South African and international law. Many GRWV office-bearers only participate in activities if there are monetary incentives. Thus GRWV’s desire is not strong enough to maintain a steady flow of political communication.

Given the desire to inform “legal” immigrants of their rights it mainly uses a rights frame, but unwittingly plays into xenophobic rhetoric that many foreigners living in the inner city are “illegal” and therefore not entitled to stay. The frame therefore has limited efficacy in building solidarity among immigrants in the inner city, while also unlikely to gain sympathy from xenophobic South Africans. Nevertheless, the frame drives leads to supplicants approaching them for assistance with rights-related matters, including helping French-speaking supplicants, fill in official forms (which are in English), help getting immigrant children into inner-city schools, and help reporting domestic violence to the police. Insofar as GRWV’s desire is to support “legal” immigrants, the rights frame helps them to do so. However, it has limited efficacy in influencing government officials, especially in the context of pervasive xenophobia in the South African civil service and Mashaba complaining about human rights champions.

Like the other CBOs in this study, GRWV uses clothing to identify themselves—in this case white golf shirts (see [Figure 5](#)), but these are only worn by office-bearers, thus reinforcing organizational hierarchies rather than building solidarity. According to Crispin Kashindi, the aesthetics of the golf shirt are used to indicate that they are “professionals” who can offer professional support.

GRWV office bearers and most members typically have smartphones, but they frequently do not have data, making it difficult to stay in regular contact. Further, some of the office bearers and many of those seeking assistance from the GRWV do not speak English, so the physical tools do not allow them to integrate easily into South African society, and especially not South Africa’s social media milieu.

GRWV only developed a social media presence after attending the participatory workshops held as part of this study. Their Facebook page, set up on 31 March 2019, has 129 followers. During my research, it made 15 posts, several of which were just welcome messages or messages announcing it could be reached through the email link on the page; it also posted the logo three times; a further two messages announced an upcoming “Migration Advisory Panel” event hosted by the City of Johannesburg, but did not include the dates and times or venue of this event.

However, its other posts attempted to elicit interaction. For example, a post in May 2019 outlined responses from South African political parties in relation to the *White Paper on International Migration for South Africa*; at the end of the post, the question “Is that enough?” This is an advance on the type of posts made by the other two CBOs, but the question only comes after nine paragraphs in a context in which social media users typically only read short texts. GRWV also does not bolster its messages by tagging others or using hashtags to emphasize its frames. Nevertheless, one follower does comment on the post: “m not clear how AU deal with freedom charter doc that



Figure 5. GRWV golf shirt.



Figure 6. Photographs posted on GRWV Facebook page.

Africa belongs to all who live in it or Africa for Africans?" but none of the GRWV office-bearers responds to the question, so interactivity stalls.

Another post in June 2019 attempts to evoke audience sympathy by telling the story of someone who threatened to take their life due to their inability to pay bribes to access paperwork at the Department of Home Affairs. After five paragraphs, the post invites page followers to advise or share their own stories. The post also includes photographs of a police station poster and a mother and child at a police station with their faces blanked out, but the post does not explain who they are and how the photographs relate to the post (see Figure 6), and the aesthetics do not create affective links with the audience.

Therefore, while these posts do try to elicit interactivity, they do not use many of the typical techniques for doing so, such as tagging, hashtags, and sharing and commenting on other posts. Further, the only time someone interacts, they do not respond. The page also does not pay attention to the French demographics of its likely audience, because posts are only supplied in English.

From the GRWV Facebook page, it is possible to discern their desire because they clearly engage with the issues, talking about migration policies using the rights frame. However, the aesthetics of the posts are weak, with images that are not well-captioned. Nevertheless, the posts are much more informative than the posts of ICRC and One Voice, suggesting a higher level of digital political literacy, but this may also be a result of attending the participatory workshops that formed part of the study, which could have resulted in them having a better grasp of how to use the platform.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings from this study suggest that the CBOs do not sufficiently use all the political affordances of social media platforms. In particular, they do not effectively use social media to "promote their own agenda and ensure particular narratives are at the forefront of social media narratives" (Malila 2020, 27).

It is difficult for small organizations to draw attention to themselves in the crowded social media landscape: conversations on these platforms are "by default ... conversations of a virtual class" (Bosch 2021, 2). Therefore, participation on these platforms does not

automatically increase visibility, especially when, as for the CBOs in this study, these problems are aggravated by the lack of digital political literacy in the way they use the platforms. For example, compared to ICRC's clear desire and framing in their day-to-day work, on their social media platforms organizational desire and framing were unclear. The unclear communication approach of One Voice in their day-to-day work is mirrored on their Facebook page. The desire and frames of GRWV on its Facebook page are clearer, but the length of its posts suggests that, like ICRC, they are mainly using the page as a broadcast medium—even though it asks for engagement. None of the CBOs connects their desires and frames to hashtags, such that their posts are disconnected from the hashtags used in wider political debates in South Africa, revealing weak digital political literacy.

Of the three CBOs, only ICRC uses visual aesthetics in a way that might resonate with some social justice-oriented audiences. The weaknesses of visual aesthetics on these CBOs' social media pages suggests a weak digital political literacy in that the aesthetics are barely used to create affective links with audiences, nor to create affective links to organizational desires and frames.

This lack of digital political literacy means that despite using social media, the CBOs are not adequately literate in *how* political interaction takes place on these platforms. Further, although it is difficult to use these platforms to hold political elites to account given that they often just ignore such posts (Malila 2020), none of the CBOs in this study even attempted such engagement by tagging political elites, media organizations or journalists; they did not use hashtags via which other users could find their posts on specific topics; and they did not share posts by political elites—with or without commentary. Hence, the CBOs' posts did not boost political participation in agendas shaped by elites, and do not challenge government exclusion of and discrimination against vulnerable communities, such as the Johannesburg inner-city residents, street traders, and immigrants. The three CBOs also did not use any of the above techniques to network with existing or potential solidarity partners. The level of digital political literacy results in failed attempts to create or inform political opinions in Johannesburg, in South Africa, or beyond.

Although One Voice could not sustain a politically meaningful presence on social media due to low literacy levels, high data costs, and minimal access to tools such as smartphones or computers, this does not apply to ICRC and GRWV. These two CBOs exhibit the technical competence to post on social media and have strong English-language skills for making meaningful political interventions. ICRC also has the resources—funding and equipment—to make regular posts on social media platforms, so this is not a deterrent to engagement.

As Malila (2020, 41) argues, the problems suggest that these CBOs lack strategic planning “about how social media will be used in the current context to achieve their accountability and development goals”. For example, ICRC has quarterly strategic planning meetings but does not discuss its political communication strategy at those meetings. The quality of the social media posts by these CBOs—in terms of framing, aesthetics and targeting of specific audiences—points to an even deeper problem than previous issues identified. The failure to take full advantage of social media affordances is a result of not knowing about and understanding some of the basic political tools for generating interaction with their audiences. Without this basic level of digital political literacy,

South African CBOs are unable to maximize the potential of social media in line with their organizational desire and unable to use the platform to engage with, and perhaps influence, elites. While even *effective* social media use does not guarantee greater power and influence, especially as virality is whimsical, at the very least it would allow CBOs to reach new audiences and extend their networks for action.

The CBOs' use of social media technologies leaves the political terrain in South African unchanged, such that the online world "reflects offline realities" (Bosch 2021, 1), especially the gross inequalities in South African; the inability of most citizens to draw attention to their life circumstances; the inability to persuade any level of government to address their concerns; and the inability to build solidarity across similarly vulnerable and impoverished groups. Whereas social media could be used to enhance the participatory capacity of CBOs to engage in governance, as provided for in South African law, the lack of digital political literacy limits their possibilities to do so.

It is therefore apparent that digital literacy, especially using social media, can only be a vehicle for social change and improved political communication if attention is given to digital political literacy—not just technical skills and equipment. Those who support CBOs, such as funders and middle-class political activists, need to pay more attention not just to providing resources and boosting the technical capacities of CBOs, but also the techniques for creating interactive content on social media. Basic tools, like tagging, hashtags, sharing and commenting, can increase the digital political literacy of South African CBOs and thereby improve their political engagement online.

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