Citizen Engagement

Politics and Digital Media in Namibia

Sadrag Panduleni Shihomeka

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Sadrag Panduleni Shihomeka, 2019

Declaration

I, **SADRAG PANDULENI SHIHOMEKA**, do hereby declare that this PhD dissertation is the result of my own investigation and research and that it has not been submitted in part or full for any other degree or to any other University or College. Where the work of other authors has been used, it has duly been acknowledged.

26 June 2019

Signature   **Date**

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my late mother, Ndaitavela Ndatunga-eumbo Shafuda

List of Acronyms

ACM	Association of Computing Machinery
AU	African Union
BEd	Bachelor of Education
COD	Congress of Democrats
CRO	chief regional officer
CYF	constituency youth forum
ECN	Electoral Commission of Namibia
FGD	focus group discussion
HIV	human immunodeficiency virus
ICT	information communication and technologies
IEEE	Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers
IMTE	Integrated Media and Technology for Adult Education
IOL	Institute for Open Learning
IPPR	Institute of Public Policy and Research
IT	information technology
ITU	International Telecommunication Union
IWS	Internet World Statistics
LA	local authority
MBA	Master of Business Administration
MP	member of parliament
NAMCOL	Namibian College for Open Learning
NBC	Namibia Broadcasting Corporation
NGO	non-governmental organization
NID	Namibia Institute for Democracy
NSA	Namibia Statistic Agency
NSHR	National Society for Human Rights
NUDO	National Democratic Union
OCR	Ohangwena Community Radio
ORYF	Ohangwena Regional Youth Forum
RC	regional council
RDP	Rally for Democracy and Progress
RYF	regional youth forum
SMS	short messaging services
SWABC	South West Broadcasting Corporation
SWAPO	South West People's Organization
TV	television
UNAM	University of Namibia
UN-DESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs

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CHAPTER 1

1

Introduction

1.1   INTRODUCTION

The use of mobile phones and an increase in the number of Internet subscribers in the global South have been perceived as a game changer in relation to the way citizens and governments communicate, interact, and share information in this era. As stated by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), there were more than 650 million mobile cellular subscriptions and about 162 million mobile active broadband subscriptions in Africa by the year 2015. Some authors believe that mobile phones are likely to cause an increase in political participation (Ponder & Haridakis, 2015; Sarrazin, 2011) while others (Chari, 2013; Otienno & Mukhongo, 2013; Olorunnisola & Douai, 2013) argue that this phenomenon may not change the political landscape. Various studies (Papacharissi, 2010; Cohen, Kahne, Bowyer, Middaugh, & Rogowski, 2012) were conducted in the global North with specific emphasis on political participation and democracy. One of their findings is that young people consider contemporary politics as disengaging. They cannot relate to older politicians and to the current political establishment, and hence they feel excluded (Otienno & Mukhongo, 2013; Van Belle & Cupido, 2013).

Some contemporary researchers claim that young people are actively engaged in political, social, and economic discussions carried out on social media platforms (Kahne, Middaugh, Lee, & Feezell, 2011; Cohen et al., 2012; Bartlett & Miller, 2011; Mattes & Richardson, 2015; Quintelier & Vissers, 2008) as a result of an increase in mobile phone ownership. However, Chadwick (2011) explains that an increase in the ownership of mobile phones does not automatically guarantee the owners' full and active participation in public affairs. Similarly**,** applying Habermas' public sphere theory, Mattes and Richardson (2015) conducted research in South Africa in order to explore the active participation of youths in local politics and public affairs. To their surprise, the findings indicated that only few youths were participating in public debates, attended community meetings, or showed any interest in political engagement. This supports Loader, Vromen, and Xenos' (2014) claim that young people in South Africa view physical attendance to political meetings as not being constructive enough and as failing to guarantee them full freedom of speech and expression. Hence it is safe to assume that the young prefer to use new media when they wish to discuss freely and actively issues that affect their lives. Furthermore, Cohen et al. (2012) reported that, in the United States, 55 per cent of youths under the age of 30 were not interested in civic or political life and 64 per cent of those of voting age (18–29-year-olds) said that they were 'not at all' interested in campaign news for the 2008 elections in America.

In a nutshell, various studies have been conducted with regard to political engagement, youth activism, mobile phones, social media, youth digital citizenship, e-governance, and political consumerism worldwide. Most of these studies investigated the use of mobile phones among the general population and in the western world rather than in the global South (Simone, 2005; Archambault, 2013; Van Belle & Cupido, 2013; Moyo, 2011). Very few

studies focused specifically on mobile phone-related citizen engagement in regional and local politics in the global South, and none so far explored this issue for Namibia. This dissertation fills precisely that gap. It looks at political participation among members of the Ohangwena Region Youth Forum (ORYF) and at their engagement in regional and local politics via mobile phones. For the purposes of this dissertation, political engagement can be defined as active involvement in political discussions, public debates, and other democratic processes concerning the betterment of living standards through political representatives.

The Ohangwena region is the second densely populated region in Namibia; more than 40 per cent of its population is under 35 years of age and has a low socioeconomic status (NSA, 2014).

It is high time to open this (largely) unexplored line of enquiry, because its findings will prove valuable both to the new media and to the political domain. Although there are now studies yielding insightful comments on mobile phones, the precise use of these devices by young people, as tools of engagement in regional and local politics in the global South, has remained unexplored. In consequence, the central question asked in this dissertation concerns how 18–35-year-olds engage in regional and local politics with the help of the mobile phone; and, taking into account everything that has been said so far, the general question that has led this research can be formulated as follows:

How do young people engage in politics through mobile phones in Namibia, in particular in the Ohangwena region?

1.2   UNDERSTANDING POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND DIGITAL MEDIA: A GLOBAL NORTH PERSPECTIVE

Papacharissi and Rubin (2000), García-Albacete (2014), and Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal (2007) are among the researchers who examined political engagement, political participation, social media and elections, mobile phones and the public sphere in the West. Their main findings and conclusions were that the Internet, the social media, and mobile phones can be complementary tools for the active political engagement of citizens at different levels and can be said to strengthen digital democracy. The increase in Internet and mobile phone usage among young people motivated the recommendations made in these studies. Their authors propose, among other things, that new media can be used to transform the virtual sphere into an environment more conducive to public debate and to attract greater numbers of young people to political discussions in both the global South and the global North (Valenzuela, Arriagada, & Scherman, 2012).

In the same vein, Ward (2009) conducted a comparative analysis of youth political engagement facilitated through websites or social media of various youth organizations in the United Kingdom. Ward's research revealed that, in spite of aspirations to increase

interactivity – particularly of the co-productive type, geared at co-opting young users to content creation – the vast majority of the 21 organizations in the sample did not attain that goal. Moreover, only one third of these organizations had established a presence on social media platforms. The social media users among the youth organizations were primarily employing these media for top-down dissemination. But if institutions and organizations in the global North are struggling to engage young people more actively, what about their counterparts in the developing world, which do not have the same resources?

Moreover, there has been a rapid growth of initiatives from private companies – such as Politics.com, Vote.com, and SpeakOut.com, and generally led by the United States – that offer political information and communication through the use of mobile social media. Politics.com was launched in October 1999 with the aim of becoming 'the place where politics happens on the Internet' (Ward, 2009: 67). However, the engagement of citizens was perceived not to be satisfactory. Another study examined 400 youth engagement websites in the United States, reporting that youth civic culture on websites deals with traditional political matters, placing a minimal focus on global issues and on civic activism (Montgomery, Robles, & Larson, 2004). However, there have hardly been any follow-up studies designed to investigate whether the presence of youth online via mobile phones leads to more involvement in online political actions worldwide. This provides justification for exploring the theme of young people's participation in politics, in the global South, through the use of mobile phones.

1.3   THE GLOBAL SOUTH: YOUNG PEOPLE, POLITICS, AND DIGITAL MEDIA

In the global South many studies have been conducted on the subject of political participation, social media, and the digital divide (Kahne et al., 2011; Cohen et al., 2012; Bartlett & Miller, 2011; Mattes & Richardson, 2015; Quintelier & Vissers, 2008; Mpofu, 2013; Peters, Winschiers-Theophilus, & Menecke, 2015). However, these studies are mainly devoted to finding out how governments and political parties engage citizens in the political processes. Most of them do not consider grassroots initiatives from citizens; for example, they do not investigate how citizens can and do use mobile phones as tools that enable them to take part in political debates at a regional level (Javaru, 2013). And, as far as Namibia is concerned, even the ways in which civic and political leaders attempt to engage young citizens in regional and local politics with the help of the mobile phone remained unexplored.

No empirical research has been conducted so far in the Ohangwena region, Namibia, specifically exploring how the young use mobile phones in order to engage regional councillors in regional and local politics for effective public service delivery and inclusive democracy. The present dissertation will fill in this gap.

Interestingly, Sey and Ortoleva (2014), in their research on the usage of mobile social media for youth protest in Chile, observed that millions of Internet and new media users play games for entertainment rather than engaging in civic discussions. This accords with the findings of many other studies: much of what users do on the Internet and on social media, even in the global South, is leisure-oriented – play, entertainment, gaming, and sociality (Arora, 2014). Arora further argued that leisure is a critical area of technology infusion that improves digital literacy and leads to great discoveries on the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the political processes. Active engagement of citizens through the use of new media can strengthen citizen participation in some of the processes of socioeconomic development.

Additionally, with the narrowing of the digital divide in the global South (West, 2015), young people in Africa have become avid social media users and most of them have access to mobile phones. In view of their lack of engagement in politics offline and their high presence on online platforms, many researchers have tried to find out what type of communications these youth engage in, both online and offline (Mpofu, 2013). However, very few studies investigated how young people use mobile phones to engage in local politics in the global South.

This is precisely the purpose of this dissertation. It aims to fill in this gap and hopes to serve as a basis for studies in political engagement through the mobile phone – a severely under-researched area of political communication, journalism, and media studies in Namibia.

1.4   WHY STUDY YOUNG PEOPLE'S MOBILE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION?

Increasing numbers of young people around the world have been found to use new media such as Facebook, Twitter, and the mobile phone as avenues for political engagement, social leisure, and entertainment (Arora, 2014; Arora & Rangaswamy, 2014; Mpofu, 2013; Wasserman, 2011; van Zoonen, 2005; Sarrazin, 2011). Studies reveal that these new media are becoming a site where young people can share ideas and stories, watch and take part in political games and videos, boycott and protest against national leaders, be active members of online communities, suggest and recommend developmental projects, advise and assist each other academically, disseminate information, and socially interact with others freely (Kahne, Lee, & Feezell, 2012).

But, although young people use the Internet intensively, not everyone uses it in the same way (see, e.g., Quintelier & Vissers, 2008). Some youngsters use the Internet as a source of information and news or for entertainment purposes (e.g., to play online games, to watch movies, and the like), whereas for others the Internet has a more social function, which can take the form of chatting, blogging, or networking on websites such as MySpace. This

differentiated use of the Internet seems to be correlated with levels of education such that highly educated youths use the Internet more often as a source of information, whereas less educated youths prefer the entertainment functions of the net (Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001; Van Dijk, 2005; Ward, 2010; Ward, 2008).

In 2014, writing about Namibia's celebrations of the international day of democracy in Windhoek, Bandora (2014: 5) claimed: 'yet, studies show declining faith among young people in politics participation in elections, in political parties and traditional social organizations'. Nevertheless, this observation does not imply that youths are apathetic and indifferent to social and political causes. Other researchers argue that, at regional and local levels of government, the main point of focus in political education and public debate should be the young and how they engage in various political activities using new media (Mattes & Richardson, 2015). Pătruţ and Pătruţ (2014) stated that citizen engagement offers a possible escape from top-down politics, in which political parties make policies with low levels of citizen participation or involvement. This means that new media can provide the means for high differentiation of political information, ideas, theoretical possibilities of participation and high level of citizens' involvement in negotiations and feedback between leaders and followers.

Different types of citizen engagement have been identified so far in the literature on regional and local authority politics in Africa: citizen engagement through the websites of political parties, government bodies, ministries, and so on; citizen engagement through participation in regional and local authority issues such as improvement and town/village projects; and citizen engagement through voting, petition drives, and hearings (Kang & Gearhart, 2010). Political participation can thus take different forms – for example voting, which is regarded as the most common and most basic form of political action. Electoral participation encompasses various other forms, such as citizen involvement in election campaigns, attendance at meetings, or attempts to access information about different political parties. Other forms of participation include citizens' engagement in grassroots politics within their local communities through attendance at community gatherings and interaction with local political representatives (Goddey, 2016). In addition, political participation involves actions such as attending civil protests, signing petitions on different issues, and joining interest groups that engage in lobbying or political advocacy. For this reason, Quintelier and Vissers (2008) posited that the youth can carry out political activities digitally either by forwarding e-mails with political content or by voting online.

Having said all this, there is a noticeable decline in young people's participation in political activities in Namibia and, concomitantly with it, an increase in mobile phone subscriptions throughout the whole of Africa. The present dissertation explores this convergence especially in relation to the Ohangwena region, trying to see to what extent this situation prevails there and why.

1.5   AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES ON POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP

To increase the level of citizen participation and engagement in political processes in the global South, governments have implemented various e-governance initiatives. Namibia has introduced an e-governance policy in 2005 (Office of the Prime Minister, 2005). Most African countries, including Namibia, are struggling to move from the e-government to the e-governance stage, simply because most government leaders and politicians are still looking at the issue of digital accessibility and literacy rather than empowering citizens to engage actively in political discussions at the national level (Mudhai, Tettey, & Banda, 2009; UN-DESA, 2008; Republic of Namibia, 2008, 2014).

For e-governance to be a reality and to contribute positively to e-democracy and civic engagement, African citizens need to look at the potential of mobile phones and of social media such as Facebook and WhatsApp for political engagement. Given the rise of digital media platforms and the use of mobile phones, especially among youths in African countries (Mudhai et al., 2009; Misuraca, 2007; UN-DESA, 2008; Funda & Mbale, 2015), e-governance initiatives should be geared at the potential of these sites and at devices for contributing to digital democracy in Africa as a whole. If such potential exists, it should be released.

Namibia scored 2.2 out of a total of 4 on the overall e-readiness index for this country in 2014 (Republic of Namibia, 2014). This is in line with Namibia's scores of 40–5 per cent ('average') on the United Nations' e-readiness index for 2013 and on the World Economic Forum's (2014) index for 2013. E-governance readiness level in Namibia does not correspond to the level of citizens' e-participation in politics and decision-making. Hence there is an opportunity for new media to nurture this transition (Banda, Mudhai, & Tettey, 2009), ensuring that citizens' active participation in political activities is realized.

Only a few researchers in the field of e-governance studied new media in conjunction with citizen engagement in regional and local politics and linked this subject to that of e-governance initiatives in African countries as a whole (Heeks & Stanforth, 2007; Heeks, 2004; UN-DESA, 2008; Bellany & Taylor, 2003). Their discussions were concerned with political communication and had a narrow focus on how mobile phones are used by young people to engage in local politics and public debates to improve service delivery. The present study aims to fill our knowledge gap in this area by looking more broadly at how the young people connect with their government officials in Namibia and at how – and how much – the mobile phone facilitate this interactivity. Mattes and Richardson (2015) highlighted that citizen engagement in local politics that can be measured in the form of individual contact with local councillors was low in South Africa by comparison to other African countries. Their findings revealed that individual participation in local politics and in protests and demonstrations such as lobbying for the removal of regional governors or councillors, or expressing disappointment with public service delivery, is mainly to be found

among citizens of low socioeconomic status and that neither dissatisfaction nor satisfaction with local politics provides an adequate account of this participation (Mudhai et al., 2009). However, this thesis still has to be put to the test for Namibia, where young people are more likely to participate in political protests and demonstrations.

Politicians and government leaders around the world still presume that citizens have a natural predisposition (Quinton, & Geißel, 2018) to participate in public affairs. However, Mattes and Richardson's (2015) findings showed that young people are less committed to politics than their parents or grandparents were. Adding to this is Evalistus' (2015) study of the political participation of university students in Namibian elections, which indicated that much needs to be done, as (even) highly educated young people appear to be less engaged in traditional politics and most of them are not interested in political change.

On the basis of the statistics released by the Electoral Commission of Namibia in 2015, 85 percent of the Namibian youths have registered to vote in 2014, against a total Namibian youth population of about 600,000. It is reported that 44 per cent of the 1,151 million who registered during the first phase fall into the group of 18–32-year-olds (ECN, 2015). However, the voter turnout was reportedly lower than expected (ECN, 2015). This situation challenges politicians to come up with ways in which to sustain the youths' interest and inspire them to go out and get really engaged in national elections in Namibia.

In the same vein, the last regional and local authority elections were held in November 2015. A total of 1,267,335 voters registered for the 2015 regional council (RC) elections, while 418,544 voters registered for the 2015 local authority (LA) elections (ECN, 2015). Out of this total number of voters for both RC and LA, 44 per cent are youths. This makes it the largest number of young people who registered for elections after independence in 1990 (ECN, 2015). Surprisingly, the voter turnout for RC and LA elections was relatively low: 39.8 per cent for the former and 36.6 per cent for the latter (ECN, 2015). This has been a concern in Namibia; in fact only the first round of RC and LA elections, in 1992, recorded a high voter turnout – 82 and 81 per cent respectively. All subsequent elections have seen very low figures. For example, in 2010 the voter turnout was 33 per cent for LA and 38 per cent for RC elections.

In terms of ICTs, the majority of Namibians, namely 69 per cent, have access to the radio; this access is slightly greater access in urban (74 per cent) than in rural (65 per cent) areas (NSA, 2014). As for mobile phones, of the 52.6 per cent Namibians who have access to them, 68.6 per cent are located in urban and 40.6 per cent in rural areas (NSA, 2014). In July 2016, Namibia had more than 2.35 million mobile phone customers – a figure that exceeded that of the entire population (we should bear in mind that one user may have more than one mobile and several sim cards). Currently over 470,000 users (23.4 per cent) access the Internet via mobile phone daily (IWS, 2016). There are over 570,000 Facebook subscribers (IWS, 2016), and most of this population is aged between 18 and 24 years. The number or Namibian men on Facebook (50.1 per cent) is only marginally higher than that of women (All in 1 Social, 2015). Of the nine political parties with seats in parliament, five have functioning

websites, and six have a social media presence on Facebook or Twitter or both (IPPR, 2015b).

In the Ohangwena region, where I conducted my study, mobile phone subscriptions have been increasing lately. In 2011, out of the 43,723 households in the region, 23,247 (53.1 per cent) owned a mobile phone, which is a good indicator of mobile acquisition. According to the census report, out of 37,404 households in the rural areas, 19,263 (51 per cent) own a mobile phone (NSA, 2014). In relatively recent years some constituencies, such as Omundaungilo, rated very low in mobile phone ownership per household: in 2011 only 370 (32 per cent) out of 1,169 households reported owning a mobile phone (NSA, 2014).

Given the low voter turnout in local regions such as Ohangwena against the high turnout at the national level, there have been strong attempts among local politicians to devise strategies for engaging young people. The exponential uptake of mobile phones, and particularly the increasing use of Facebook by young people, present an opportunity for the council people in this region to leverage the new social media platforms so as to reach out to young citizens and connect with them on matters of political concern.

On the other hand, informal, youth-led movements for democratic change are on the rise in Namibia, as can be seen for example in the formation in 2014 of the Affirmative Repositioning movement, which is protesting and demanding a fair process of land distribution to the landless, especially the youth (New Era Reporter, 2014). It is believed that the youth is likely to make its mark on democracy-building processes through an increase in social media usage, with the help of these digital affordances. In light of the availability of the new media and their proliferation among Namibian youths, this dissertation seeks to qualify the type and level of political engagement that this technology stimulates and inspires in this population. It also aims to increase our understanding of the kinds of issues that young people get involved in and the ways in which they capitalize on their mobile media in dealing with them.

1.6   RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Let me return now to the main research question that has led my study: How do young people engage in politics through mobile phones in Namibia, in particular in the Ohangwena region?

To answer this research question, I set out to provide answers to the following subordinate questions:

- RQ1: What kinds of young people participate and what motivates them to engage in regional and local politics?
- RQ2: What is the nature of their political participation through mobile phones?
- RQ3: To what extent and in what ways do young people connect with the government and other stakeholders through the use of mobile phones?

1.7   RESEARCH PLAN AND METHODS

1.7.1   Research Design

In this study I have used an exploratory qualitative research design in order to investigate the attitudes, opinions, feelings and experiences of 18–35-year-old members of the ORYF as they relate to the use of the mobile phone as a tool for engagement in political life. According to Godhard and Melville (2001: 34), 'qualitative research undertakes a commitment from the researcher to see the world through the eyes of the author, other person or the subject'. Others, such as Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2003) and Cooper and Schindler (1998), posit that a qualitative researcher interprets the data by giving them meaning, translating them, and making them understandable and relevant to the study.

Qualitative content analysis of Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups, focus group discussions with representative youths from regional youth forums, semi-structured interviews with government officials, participant observation in community meetings, and semi-structured interviews with representative youths were used for the purpose of collecting the relevant data for this research. Numerous interviews were conducted on the attitudes and perceptions of young people and on their various engagements in regional and local politics. These interviews were recorded in a reflective diary and tape-recorded. The questions for the semi-structured interviews were designed in such a way that they are easy to understand and can be grouped both according to the objectives of the study and according to the categories indicated by the literature review.

1.7.2   Research Ethics

I informed the participants and negotiated with them a formal agreement (see Appendix C) in which I clearly stated their right to withdraw from this research at any time. This was done through their chairperson, as well as through the regional council's office at Eenhana. On Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups, I asked the group administrator to inform members of my presence. I was myself a participant in all the discussions, since I, too, came from the region. Participants were assured that the information provided will be kept confidential and their identities will not be divulged. They all had the opportunity to verify the data before publication. Thus confidentiality and anonymity were assured. No names were taken, so responses could not be linked to individual participants.

1.7.3   Dissertation Overview

This dissertation is structured as follows.

Chapter 1 ('Introduction') gives a historical overview of the use of new media for engagement in politics in different parts of the world. The chapter also highlights some of the concerns, disagreements, and topical issues of various researchers. This material led to the identification of gaps in the literature and hence to the formulation of the main research question.

Chapter 2 ('Literature Review') attempts to be a comprehensive survey of the main literature on citizen engagement, political participation, public sphere and the emerging markets, shifting notions of citizenship in the digital age, and politics in relation to the social media in the global North and South. The chapter also gives a general outline of the use of social media by the youth. It starts from a global perspective, which then narrows down to the African context and finally focuses on Namibia. The chapter criticizes current studies, locating their weaknesses; but it also presents their strengths and explains how they inform this research. Gaps and missing avenues of enquiry are identified in the existing literature, along with concerns and disagreements among researchers that this dissertation aims to address. Additionally, the chapter highlights some studies on the relationship between young people's political engagement and the new media, especially in Africa and, even more specifically, in Namibia. The research carried out there contributes to the growing body of literature in the area of effective public service delivery.

Chapter 3 ('Methodology') focuses on the methodological principles followed in the collection, analysis, and interpretation of the data discussed in these pages. The dissertation used a qualitative approach, making content analysis its key method. Semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation were used in collecting the data.

Chapter 4 ('Old and New Media') focuses on traditional mass media versus new media as sources for youth political information and on the normative understandings of their relationship at regional and local levels of governance. It highlights how mobile media are slowly taking over from the traditional media as a political participatory platform, owing to the portability and mobility of mobile phones among the youth population.

Chapter 5 ('Offline and Online Political Networks') examines youth forums and gatherings and face-to-face (offline) participation among their members. Drawing from participant observations of meetings, the chapter also looks at forums as offline and online political networks for the youth, investigates how young people struggle to expand these networks via mobile connectivity (online), and discusses the challenges they face in their attempt to enhance democracy. Overall, the chapter looks at youth forums as network political platforms for employment, political identification, dialoguing, and re-energizing youth morale – given that, to these young people, politics is all about sociopolitical issues such as empowerment, teenage pregnancy, HIV/AIDs, alcohol and drug abuse, and mobilization.

Chapter 6 ('Engaging Citizens from Below and Above') deals with how young people and political leaders use mobile phones as a tool for engaging in regional and local politics. The chapter highlights the digital accessibility and availability of political leaders. It considers specific challenges and obstacles experienced both by the young and by political leaders during engagement via digital platforms and shows how both parties try to resolve these issues in order to nurture political intimacy and an inclusive politics.

Chapter 7 ('Mobile Social Media and Digital Literacy') looks at how young people learn to use mobile social media for political networks and how, at times, they become effective publics. Here digital politics manifests itself through new forms of literacy and through entertainment that enhances direct and indirect democracy, enriching the political spectrum of the region – and of the country at large.

Chapter 8 ('Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations') concludes the dissertation by reflecting on the aim that led this study, on the main research questions and their findings, and on larger implications for further research.

The next chapter presents the relevant literature on young people's political participation in relation to the use of social media, gradually bringing this subject within a Namibian compass.

CHAPTER 2

Theoretical Perspectives on the Role of Mobile Phones in Youth Political Integration

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Extensive research has been conducted in the past few decades, especially after the proliferation of mobile phones in both the global South and the global North, on citizen engagement in politics and public debates (Papacharissi, 2010; Van Belle & Cupido, 2013). A lot has been written, debated, discussed, and reviewed on the influence that mobile phones have on political participation. Scholars in political communication, journalism, and media have been struggling with questions such as how citizens use the digital media in order to participate in politics and civic debates. Some studies found that the digital media have a positive effect on political participation, while others reported that they caused a decline in political activity, especially among the young population, in both the developing and developed world.

This chapter focuses on the main theoretical perspectives, concepts, areas of study, and ongoing debates to which this dissertation attempts to contribute. By doing so, the chapter implicitly addresses the theoretical and conceptual relevance of this dissertation, which will be further elaborated upon. It gives a concise outline of the various theories that are believed to encourage citizen participation in politics, especially in relation to the use of new media such as mobile phones and the social media, but also in relation to traditional media in democracies across the world. It covers, among other things, Jürgen Habermas' public sphere theory, Papacharissi's theory of the virtual sphere, John Rawls' theory of liberal democracy, and direct democracy and political entertainment theories.

2.2 THE PUBLIC SPHERE THEORY AND THE EMERGENCE OF A VIRTUAL SPHERE THEORY

In the past decades several studies were conducted with the purpose of finding ways in which conventional media such as radio, television, newspapers, and magazines could be supplemented so as to engage citizens, and especially the youth, in in the public sphere, more specifically in political processes at regional and local governance levels (see Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Rangaswamy & Cutrell, 2013; Mossberger, Tolbert, & McNeal, 2007; Habermas, 2006). Conceptualized by Habermas, the public sphere is a discursive arena where private people come together as a public, in order to discuss freely matters of shared interest. Examples of the public sphere at the time of Habermas' writing were saloons, coffee shops, or magazines – spaces where white men belonging to local or national elites could join in the discussion of commercial, political, social, and other public affairs topics advanced in the newspapers of the day, and did so for the benefit of the society. Although the notion of a public sphere of this sort is now criticized on account of its exclusion of minority groups such as blacks, women, youth groups, and the underprivileged, the theory is still applicable;

and the formulation of a concept of the public sphere that emphasizes the collectivism of individuals or their capacity to create a unitary space for the common good remains valid.

Theoretically, new media, including mobile phones, may be regarded as tools that can be used by citizens to engage in discussions that touch on issues of national concern – such as land distribution, corruption, political ideologies, and other social issues; and, through these devices, they do so within a public space or 'sphere' redefined as 'the virtual sphere' (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Papacharissi, 2010; Mudhai, 2013). However, according to Papacharissi (2010), the virtual sphere has been dominated by advertisements and public relations instead. Political leaders, local government leaders, and businesses alike are selling their interests to citizens, while citizens are regarded as consumers of those products. This phenomenon is sometimes termed 'digital political consumerism' (DPC) (Kyroglou & Henn, 2017). By contrast, other authors, for example Hart and Henn (2017), highlight how digital media facilitate civic engagement and enable citizens to inform, guide, and direct leaders and managers on the matter of what is needed and how they want it. This is one of the background reasons why the goal of this dissertation is to explore how young people and political leaders at regional and local levels of governance use these new media, especially mobile phones, as engagement tools. They nurture a digital democracy; and it is very important to explore this process.

In his research on democracy building and civic responsibility in Namibia, Evalistus (2015) has revealed that, so far, the Namibian public sphere has been dominated by politicians and government leaders. Citizens, especially the youth, are being guided by the government on what their plans should be and how their issues could be solved. It is now expected that this state of passive reliance will be disrupted, since the majority of young people possess information and communication technology (ICT) devices with Internet access. Most of the political leaders and government officials participate in online communities, yet we know little about how they engage in such forums and about the new discursive forms that emerge as they address citizens in their constituencies through these novel channels.

Recent decades witnessed a decline in young people's interest in attending public community meetings, political rallies, and consultative meetings of stakeholders (Mycock & Tonge, 2014). Such traditional platforms for political engagement are reportedly being used only by older people and children. It has also been observed that most of the young people who attend these platforms are from politically well-off families, which show signs of political exclusivity. Thus replacing the traditional public sphere by, or transforming it into, a virtual sphere has every chance of being a more inclusive option in the context of rural Namibia, given that many of the young people here are already online. Additionally, a public sphere in Habermas' (2006) understanding of the term should be free and open and should offer a meeting point for all the people interested in discussing political and societal matters, national or international, regardless of their age, sex, political affiliation, or cultural background. If these elements are not present, then we cannot talk about a 'public sphere'.

The situation demands a widening of the notion of the public sphere in Africa, where citizens, through cheap, portable mobiles and low-cost pre-paid data plans, have begun to carve new spaces to engage political leaders in debates around social issues that concern them (Ndavula & Mueni, 2014). This process opens more opportunities for citizens to interact with the community. It also makes it possible for them to inform their politicians as to what needs they have and how they should be fulfilled – unlike in the past, when citizens' programmes were designed top-down by government representatives, while citizens, supposedly the direct beneficiaries of these programmes, were not even consulted (Evalistus, 2015).

Interestingly, in Namibia and in other African countries the traditional public sphere is still dominated by black elites, politicians, and a few black women, most of them of advanced age (Habermas, 1991; Lister, 2015; Virmasalo, 2017). For this reason the present study sets out to examine the phenomenon of interest – acquisition and proliferation of mobile phones among citizens – regardless of the latter's social class or economic status. In a nutshell, this dissertation looks at the emergence and the potential of a *virtual sphere* as opposed to the *public sphere* and defines the former as a space where young people, women, the less educated, members of minorities and of political parties in opposition, the homeless, the jobless, the landless, and the less cared for are likely to meet and deliberate on issues that affect their lives, and to do so without fear of intimidation or threat from anyone. Such a sphere consists of, or is created by, new media whereby citizens may use their mobile phones for messaging (SMSs) or for being active on social network sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

Although the virtual sphere theory has been criticized for not accounting for physical contacts (Chigona, Chigona, Ngqokelela, & Mpofu, 2009), a virtual sphere is indeed emerging as a public sphere, especially for younger generations (Papacharissi, 2010) around the globe. To give an example, in Kenya, during the violence eruptions after the 2007 elections, Kenyans have used social media to report cases of violence, intimidation, and the like via the Ushahidi platform. Ushahidi is a platform that was created by the Kenyan community with the main aim of reporting cases of violence, threats, and corruption during election time (Wasserman & Garman, 2014) and is accessible via mobile phone. This platform is now adopted in Namibia, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, and most other African countries. In Namibia it was adopted by the National Society for Human Rights (NSHR) to monitor the 2014 presidential and National Assembly elections and is reported to work very well (Evalistus, 2015). That being said, platforms such as this one enable data aggregation around political participation, but are less involved in ongoing processes of relationship building and communication sustenance on political and social issues. However, while several studies have already been devoted to data systems of this type, whose aim is to hold governments accountable, there are far fewer studies on how governments and their young citizens engage politically through digital forums in regular, day-to-day fashion. As already explained, the present dissertation aims at filling in this gap for Namibia by contributing to this important but underexplored topic.

2.3   SHIFTING NOTIONS OF CITIZENSHIP IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Citizens around the globe in the twenty-first century are no longer relying on the government to supply to them information or data. Young people are not happy with the way governments engage them in public debates (Mattes & Richardson, 2015). This upward trend in young people's dissatisfaction with conventional political engagement is not occurring just in developed democracies such as the United States, Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, but also in other parts of the world, including Africa (Henn, Oldfield, & Hart, 2017; Reichert, 2017). Citizens have been found to disconnect themselves from governments in different ways (Reichert, 2017; Whiteley, 2012; Tormey, 2015; Norris, 2011). For example, young people are frequently negative about politics and its processes, the tone of the press is often cynical, political candidates seldom succeed in appealing directly to young voters and do not attempt to address them in their own terms about their concerns, politicians have poisoned the public well (particularly in the United States) with the vitriol of negative campaigning, and young people see the media filled with inauthentic performances from officials who have been staged by professional communication managers (Bennett, 2008a).

The tendency to transform the digital space into a new space of political activity should be seen as a compensatory move, in response to this general deterioration of the traditional spaces. On the one hand, Bennett (2008b), Coleman (2008), and Benkler (2006) signal that various online practices – ranging from blogging to types of conflict and protest behaviour displayed in gaming, fan, and entertainment sites – represent new forms of civic or media engagement and that these forms resulted in part from e-democracy initiatives (see also Lewis, 2013). On the other hand, while some people may turn to social media occasionally and only for a few activities, others, notably young people, make social media an integral part of their lives, using them for a variety of purposes and activities such as entertainment, debate, political news, and the sharing of national jokes (Hargittai & Walejko, 2008; Arora, 2014; Arora & Rangaswamy, 2013).

And here we must introduce the all-important concept of digital citizenship, which appeared around the development of Web 2.0: digital citizenship became a vital instrument for associating Internet use with the ability to participate in political activities (Shulman, Beisser, Larson, & Shelley, 2002; Yang, 2009; Shelley, Thrane, Shulman, Lang, Beisser, & Larson, 2004). According to Mossberger et al. (2007: 56),

> political digital citizens can be defined as those who use the Internet every day as frequent use requires some means of access (usually at home or mobile), some technical skills, and the educational competencies to perform tasks such as findings and using political information on the Web, and communicating with others on the Internet on political issues concerning their communities.

Additionally, Mossberger et al. (2007) have empirically demonstrated the benefits of digital citizenship in the economic, political, and social life of a country. According to Emmer and Kunst (2018: 2193) 'digital citizens can participate in a democratic domestication of the digital sphere, extending their established practices and behaviors in the digital sphere and developing new forms of activity at the same time'. Other experts in the new field of digital citizenship and digital democracy show how Internet access at home, via mobile phones, or via Internet cafés in one's region, village, or constituency promotes digital citizenship, since it allows people to use the Internet frequently enough to partake effectively in political debates and decision-making processes on social matters that concern them directly (Thomas & Streib, 2003; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006; McNeal, Hale, & Dotterweich, 2008; McNeal, Tolbert, Mossberger, & Dotterweich, 2003; Edmiston, 2003; Asgarkhani, 2005; Chadwick & May, 2003; Edwards, 2008).

Thus, as citizens gain more experience of being online, they are likely to express their views on important issues that affect their lives, such as rape, fraud, corruption, or unemployment. Mossberger (2008) contends that having access to new media is a precondition for digital citizenship, which in turn may serve as a prerequisite for citizens to engage in political life both online and offline. This conclusion is highly debated and contested by researchers (Ignatow & Robinson, 2017; Vromen, 2017; Hintz & Brown, 2017). Some advance an ethnocentric notion of citizenship, whereby citizens are likely either to fear or to neglect using digital technologies as tools for engagement. Such critics point out that in some countries (including Namibia) citizens are not necessarily using digital technologies as engagement tools, but rather as entertainment platforms. They also claim that many citizens in such countries suffer from technophobia because they lack the technical know-how and, as a result, would not feel safe enough to engage in online debates; they are reluctant to take part in any political activity mediated by electronic gadgets.

There are, to be fair, perceived disadvantages to political digital citizenship and e-democracy (Hintz & Brown, 2017; Mitchell, 2016) such as lack of control of the content to be discussed, lack of proximity among citizens, and poor meeting attendance – during election campaigns, and even during the state address by political heads of state. Digital citizenship may also be affected by the digital divide (McNeal et al., 2008; McNeal et al., 2003), as not all the citizens have equal access to digital tools. The digitally more experienced citizens are likely to dominate public debates at the expense of the ones less adept at using these digital tools. Despite these drawbacks of digital democracy, a fresh wave of technological optimism has more recently accompanied the advent of social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, wikis, and the blogosphere through the mobile Internet (Chadwick, 2011; Loader, & Mercea, 2011; Arora, 2014). The distinctive feature of this second generation of Internet democracy is the replacement of the public sphere model with that of a networked, citizen-centred perspective that offers opportunities to connect the private sphere of autonomous political identity to a multitude of chosen political spaces (Papacharissi, 2010).

The role of the new media is to focus on the citizen-user as the driver of democratic innovation through the self-actualized networking of citizens engaged in lifestyle and identity politics (Dahlgren 2009; Papacharissi, 2010). Various scholars have claimed that, if citizens are equipped with new media, they may no longer have to be passive consumers of political party propaganda, government spin, or mass media news; they would actually be enabled to challenge discourses, share alternative perspectives, and publish their own opinions. The existent literature regarding the use of social media platforms (see also Van Zoonen, 2005) suggests that the most active political users are social movement activists, politicians, party workers, and people who are already fully committed to political causes. Papacharissi (2010), for example, pointed out how citizen-users can participate in campaigns while simultaneously enjoying television or chatting with family in the privacy of their own home.

Thus digital democracy extends the effective franchise by creating opportunities for people who would not otherwise participate in policymaking; it enables more extensive public comment on rule-making, for example. Digital democracy is a way of extending participation into civil society beyond its elected representatives (Dryzek, 2000).

2.4 ACTIVISM DEFINED

Darity (2008: 23) defined *activism* as 'an action' undertaken 'by an individual or group with the intent to bring about social, political, economic, or even ideological change in their community', be that 'village or country'. This change could be directed at single community organizations or institutions (e.g. town councils), at more complex systems (e.g. the central government or regional or local government such as municipalities), or at the general public. In most cases, but not all, activism is directed at supporting or opposing some controversial issue – human rights, land distribution, unemployment, the income gap between rich and poor – and takes the form of mass demonstrations or protests to this effect. In the digital era, such public actions may take place digitally at any time when citizens are free to use their devices for this purpose.

In Namibia, activism has been rife in the political and social arena, especially around issues of land distribution, income inequality, and human rights, since, given current social inequalities and inequities in the distribution of public resources, young people feel disenfranchised (Namibia, 2008; Keulder, Nord, & Emminghaus, 2010). Activism takes very different forms, which can range from civil disobedience, rioting, strikes organized by unions, and governmental or institutional lobbying to verbal or physical confrontation, various forms of terrorism (Coleman, 2008; Chadwick, 2011; Bakardjieva, Svensson, & Skortic, 2012), and the use of political games, videos, and other digital media. But the use of new media is emerging as a dominant form of activism among youths who wish to draw the

attention of political, regional, and local authority leaders to particular issues in the public sphere that are directly relevant to their interests. Given the paucity of studies on the nature of activism in Namibia, especially at the local and regional level, I will embark upon the task set out in this dissertation by looking at the involvement of young Namibian people in regional and local politics and attempting to understand what motivates them.

2.5 POLITICAL AND DIGITAL ACTIVISM

The potential of new media to enhance political engagement and the civic participation of people in regional and local governance has been examined in numerous theoretical and empirical studies (Chadwick, 2011; Edmiston, 2003; Namibia, 2008; Keulder et al., 2010; Mattes & Richardson, 2015).

Many scholars have criticized digital political engagement as a new form of consumption in this neoliberal economy (McNeal et al., 2008; Mossberger, Tolbert, & Stansbury, 2003; Thomas & Streib, 2003). As a type of activity, political consumerism can be defined as a series of steps or initiatives taken by citizens towards buying products or paying for services from a specific producer or service provider, for political reasons or out of political considerations (Stolle, Hooghe, & Micheletti, 2005). As a type of attitude, this kind of consumerism is likely to create situations in which citizens buy products that do not suit their needs – for example, they may join political parties that do not address their societal problems; as a result, they fail to come up with their own political identity. Indeed some studies (Montgomery, Robles, & Larson, 2004) analysed how political consumers come to buy the 'wrong' political products and services by joining or participating in a political activity that is not aligned with their interests. Young US citizens appear to be increasingly disconnected, both from each other and from public life (Bartlett & Miller, 2011; Montgomery et al., 2004). And this phenomenon is not unique to the United States; it is also manifest in African countries.

But the same study by Montgomery et al. (2004) also reported, by contrast, a very different find: youths don't just consume digital content, they are active participants and creators of this new media culture, as they develop their own content, design personal websites, and launch their own online enterprises. The proliferation of youth-created web pages and message board postings, and the popularity of instant messaging among young people (Quintelier & Vissers, 2008), all contribute to the increasing use of new media for political communication among the youth. In the United States, digital activism among young people can be measured through their participation in community affairs, voter turnout, trust in institutions and people, knowledge of public affairs and attention to what's going on, and the quality of their political discourse (Stolle et al., 2005). These measurement variables can equally be used in other countries around the globe.

2.6 E-GOVERNANCE AND DIRECT INCLUSIVE DEMOCRACY
IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

In the reviewed studies (Thomas & Streib, 2003; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006; Mbale, Ntinda, & van Staden, 2015; Republic of Namibia, 2008, 2014) the following two concepts appear to overlap, somewhat confusingly: e-governance and e-government. In this section I attempt to clarify the difference between them and to show how each one relates to the current study.

Most of the aforementioned studies focus on e-government, which is mainly aimed at digitalizing government activities around the globe, in order to ensure that citizens have access to these services any time anywhere. E-government activities, especially in developing countries, are primarily concerned with e-readiness and place comparatively little emphasis on engaging the citizens and prompting them to demand services from their government leaders.

According to Singh, Pathak, Naz, and Belwal (2010: 35), e-governance 'is a process by which the public sector uses information and communication technologies such as social media with the aim of improving information and service delivery, encouraging citizen participation in the decision-making process and making government more accountable, transparent and effective'. Fath-Allah, Cheikhi, Al-Qutaish, and Idri (2014: 805) see the e-government, by contrast, 'as the use of New Digital Media Technologies (NDMTs) by government agencies that has the ability to transform relations with citizens, visitors and businesses, and between all arms of government'. This tells us, in a nutshell, that e-governance is concerned with citizen engagement, while e-government has to do with the relations between citizens and the government.

Mudhai, Tettey, and Banda (2009), too, examined the difference between e-governance and e-government and defined e-governance differently, namely in terms of engaging citizens in policy formulation and in the administration and evaluation of government services by openly discussing with them issues pertaining to effective decision-making. But e-governance is only the second stage in an e-democracy; before getting there, citizens first need to secure access to digital services, which is done through websites, e-mails, social media platforms specifically created for the purpose, reduced data costs or government sponsorship, libraries, or Internet facilities that allow non-stop participation. This first stage is e-government. E-government refers, then, to a process or actions whereby the government gives citizens access to its services if they adopt various digital platforms as discussion forums. But e-government has little to do with engagement; its aim is to offer access to services, but not (or not necessarily) to involve citizens in discussions and debates concerning their society. So the key difference between e-government and e-governance is this. E-government is a one-way communication protocol whereby government officials from different offices keep feeding citizens with information or documents. E-governance,

on the other hand, is a two-way communication protocol that encourages the active engagement of citizens and government representatives in the process of decision-making and policy formulation.

Some studies revealed that e-government takes more of a top-down approach to management, while e-governance takes a rather bottom-up approach. According to Mudhai (2013: 23) in a later study, e-government involves 'e-service delivery of government activities to people such as passive automation, data processing, internal workings and back office functions, having websites for government ministries and agencies'. This can be treated as a first stage in the formation of digital citizenship – a stage where the electorate acquires digital power by getting permanent, 24/7 access to public information and documents (see Namibia, 2004; Albert, 2009). However, many countries in Africa and elsewhere in the world are already beyond this stage. Researchers are now exploring the second stage of e-governance, which is concerned with interaction and communication, external workings and front-office functions of citizens – all designed to enable them to criticize or praise their government publicly, via new digital media such as social media platforms and mobile phones (Misuraca, 2007; Heeks, 2004; UN-DESA, 2008).

The differences between e-government and e-governance point to two versions of e-digitalization of government services: in one version, the government is a supplier of information and data to citizens (e-government); in the other, the citizens are controllers of government activities (e-governance). This is what makes the present research worthwhile, as it looks at new media from the demand side – that is, from the perspective of the citizens. New media should enable citizens to actively engage the government on social issues that affect their lives, instead of feeding them with information on political and public affairs in which they have no say.

But the fact that this dissertation introduces the perspective of the citizens into the equation does not mean that it neglects the other side of the coin; my study does seek to cover both the supply and the demand side of e-governance, though it concentrates on the demand side, whereby citizens (mainly the youth) are directing and guiding government activities for their benefits, particularly at regional and local authority levels. On the supply side, governments around the world decide what to give to communities and how to give it through digital platforms. But the demand side requires citizen participation in the formulation and drafting of bills or programmes; and it uses online forums, so that no one may feel left out. Citizens are the ones to inform their leaders about what they need and how they are going to consume (or not) what they receive from the government. Here one can see how the new media have a direct and strong effect on the political activism and civic engagement of citizens. Hence the power of these new media cannot be overlooked.

Mbale et al. (2015) reiterate that the goal of e-governance in any country is to enhance efficiency, effectiveness, and transparency as well as to aid citizen inclusion and participation in democracy. In 2012 the United Nations described the evolution of e-services in various

countries and their relationship to politics and social media. There seem to be four main stages of online service development. Countries typically begin by having an emerging online presence through simple websites; then they progress to an enhanced state, with deployment of multimedia content and two-way interaction; from there they advance to a transactional level, where many services are provided online and governments solicit citizen input on matters of public policy; and, finally, they create a connected web of integrated functions, widespread data sharing, and routine consultation with citizens through social networking and related tools (United Nations, 2012). Although all these processes are real and happening, very few countries have adopted online services and use them to engage their citizens in public debates.

In Africa, South Africa was singled out as an example of e-governance in sub-Saharan Africa, while Nigeria held the second place in the West Africa region (UN-DESA, 2008). However, that region occupies the lowest rank when it comes to e-governance initiatives, which indicates that sub-Saharan African countries are not really engaging their citizens in democratic processes, even though they rank higher on e-readiness ratings (Funda, 2014) and, accordingly, prioritize their e-governance initiatives. This underlines the relevance of the present study as to the extent to which new media technologies may accelerate bottom-up processes of political participation and civic engagement.

Heeks (2002) identified three aspects of e-governance that are of interest to digital democracy in Africa and in the world at large when it comes to promoting digital inclusivity. First, processes such as e-administration and e-service delivery of government activities need to be improved, which involves a transfer of power, authority, and resources for processes from their existing locus to new locations. Secondly, connecting citizens is key, whether we refer to citizens as voters and stakeholders from whom the African public sector should derive its legitimacy or as customers who consume public services (a perspective that brings into relief the issue of political consumerism, discussed previously). The third aspect concerns building external relations with the citizens. This means that e-governance allows citizens and government to be involved in open debates about public issues outside their official sites; and citizens can do that at their own convenience, at a time of their own choice. These three aspects are crucial for a country's citizens, but many studies (Heeks, 2002; Funda, 2014; Mattes & Richardson, 2015) did not really investigate whether and how citizens can be (more) in charge of government and political affairs by using digital devices such as mobile phones.

For e-governance to be a reality and to contribute positively to e-democracy and civic engagement, African leaders need to look at the potential of mobile phones and of social media such as Facebook and Twitter. With the advancement of digital media platforms and the proliferation of mobile phones, especially among young people in African countries (Misuraca, 2007; UN-DESA, 2008; Funda & Mbale, 2015), e-governance initiatives should

be geared towards mobile media. This would be the way to ensure that digital citizenship contributes to digital democracy in Africa as a whole.

In sub-Saharan Africa, Botswana is one of the developing countries that scored high on e-consultation, which is part of its e-governance strategy: Botswana ranks among the top 25 nations that employ interactive methods to solicit citizens' opinions, feedback, and input, which comes in the form of online channels, information polls, bulletin boards, chat rooms and instant messaging, and weblogs; and there is also formal online consultation on interactive methods (see UN-DESA, 2008). Botswana is listed together with countries such as Cameroon, Congo, Ghana, Mauritania, and Mozambique. Namibia is not on that list. This is a big concern for researchers, though Namibia is reported to have a good policy on e-governance and most Namibian government agencies do have social media platforms. From the African countries that were listed, Mozambique is the only one that publishes citizens' opinions among its findings or results; and these include e-opinions on websites (UN-DESA, 2008). African countries such as Kenya, Algeria, and Tunisia, which are top-ranking in terms of e-readiness level, are rated very low in terms of e-participation. The coexistence of these divergent aspects stresses the need for specific studies, which should examine how the rise of mobile media affects citizen participation and engagement both in the entire region and in specific areas – such as Namibia, investigated here (see UN-DESA, 2008).

Some studies reveal that the e-governance readiness level does not correspond to the level of citizens' e-participation in politics and decision-making in different countries. There is an opportunity here for new media to influence political participation positively (Papacharissi, 2010), since the active participation of citizens can be realized through mobile Internet or mobile social media. However, the studies reviewed so far do not cover in any depth the role of new media in awakening and stimulating citizen engagement in regional and local politics; they only mention such a role and link it to e-governance initiatives in African countries (Heeks & Stanforth, 2007, Heeks, 2004; Misuraca, 2007; UN-DESA, 2008; Bellany & Taylor, 2003).

Interestingly, the Internet was used to communicate polling stations results in both South African Elections and the Namibian Elections in 2014 (Funda, 2014). This made citizens proud of using this system for the first time in the electoral processes. However, the questions of how citizens were engaged in the discussion of the elections results and whether their opinions were solicited after elections remained unanswered. Most of the studies conducted so far concentrate on the use of the Internet in elections but largely ignore the use of social networking platforms like Facebook or Twitter in the context of regional and local politics. This is another gap that this study seeks to fill.

2.7 POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND NEW MEDIA

2.7.1 Political Engagement in Africa

Conroy, Feezell, and Guerrero (2012) defined political engagement as a conventional form in which political knowledge and involvement manifest themselves among citizens in any country that promotes democracy. Political democracy entails the participation of citizens in activities at local and regional government levels, and this leads to the articulation of a participatory politics that strengthens effective e-governance service delivery. Much research conducted nowadays is dedicated to finding ways to replace the conventional methods of engaging citizens in political processes and decision-making at local levels. The outcomes suggest that digital civic participation is the main solution (Williamson, 2010; Scherer, 2016).

In Kenya, political debates on Twitter became heated in the lead-up to the 2013 presidential elections, yet less than 5 per cent of Kenyans used Twitter (Kretchun, 2013). What is more, Brännström's (2012) investigation of gender and other social discrepancies in accessibility to and use of ICTs in Kenya and Somalia found that the existing official statistics did not fully capture the distribution in the use of these new telecommunication systems by different social groups. Besides, we cannot claim that having access necessarily enhances engagement, or vice versa. On the contrary, in Somalia, for example, as the country recovered from civil war, the Internet became a means of promoting group political identity within the Somali diaspora, although it also served to amplify political and social divisions (Issa Salwe, 2006).

Whereas most African ICT users appear to fall in the grey area between the groups that own ICT devices and groups that borrow them, or access to them, from friends and relatives as well as from group-access centres (Funda & Mbale, 2015; Heeks, 2002), there is a need for reintermediation models that insert a human intermediary between the citizen and the growing digital infrastructure of e-government. Democratic governance could be significantly improved through the open and equal deliberation between citizens, representatives, and policymakers that is afforded by the new ICTs (Loader & Mercea, 2011; Mattes & Richardson, 2015), regardless of the geographical location and socioeconomic status of these people.

2.7.2 Uses of New Media in African Politics

Early research on digital citizenship (Hoffman & Novak, 1998; National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 1995) examined closely the need for proper ICT infrastructures and for accessibility to ICTs facilities. This research revealed that access to such facilities does not automatically promote digital activism, though it lifts the digital divide between people. Van Deursen and Van Dijk (2014) examined the digital divide and the matter of participation and noted that, when citizens wish to engage in social issues that

affect their lives, they can use ICTs for this purpose either in their home countries or abroad. In Africa, Kenya had the highest number of Internet and mobile users in the sub-Saharan region by 2009 (Mpofu, 2011). But, in spite of this high record, it was found that political parties and leaders in this country failed to engage actively the electorate. Their relationship with the population is still a top-down one, in which discussion and exchanges with the citizens are not really on the agenda; leaders do not seek to draw their communities into debate to find out their views on various social issues. So Kenya does not seem to use the available technology effectively; and it is not the only country facing this challenge.

Certainly the spread of Internet and mobile telephony has led to the emergence of a new kind of citizen participation in many sub-Saharan countries: it has enabled citizens to form online communities and to meet in online forum groups. While this movement is less visible and its impact is more discreet in Africa than in Europe and the United States, vibrant online communities do exist in many countries and citizen journalists are increasingly using new media platforms such as blogs, SMS, social networks, microblogs, video-sharing platforms, and mapping to report and comment on a wide range of topics (Mutsvairo, Columbus, & Leijendekker, 2014). But the whole matter of evaluating the effect of ICTs in Africa is very complex. Associated with a reshaping of the public sphere, these devices are hailed as signalling the revival of bottom-up, participatory democracy in the West. However, the consequences of their use in African countries are less clear. The present study aims to bring some clarity on this front.

In African politics, democratic citizenship has been regarded for a long time as expressed through active attendance or embodied in the presence of citizens at political rallies, public meetings, conferences, and similar gatherings. But such forms of participation has been on the decline for some time now. Younger generations increasingly choose not to attend meetings in person any more, as they can participate in them digitally (Mattes & Richardson, 2015). Besides, young citizens claim that going to those meetings is a waste of time. They would rather stay at home and do some other constructive work, since they feel that such gatherings do not address issues that affect their lives. In these circumstances, political parties and political leadership have to rethink their way of engaging citizens in the democratic political processes as well as in public debate. In the same vein, regional and local authority councillors, too, are struggling to attract a large number participants at community meetings, and especially to ensure the presence of young people, but in most cases community meetings are attended only by elderly citizens (Lowndes, Pratchett, & Stoker, 2001).

Wasserman and Garman (2014) conducted research on the meaning of citizenship, media use, and democracy in South Africa. They explored how South Africans use the social media to engage in public debate and how the active public sphere changed as a result of their activity. Young South Africans who were interviewed as part of the study appeared to be disengaged from politics and felt that the media do not speak to or connect with their

everyday lives. This sends a strong message to other political leaders in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to find innovative and entertaining platforms, capable of engaging the youth in political decisions. Young people view the state, both at national and at local levels, as not prepared to listen to ideas, consider their experiences, or ponder on their conditions of life. Wasserman and Garman's study dealt with media in general, and – unlike the present study – did not look specifically at the use of social media in regional and local governance politics.

Wasserman and Garman concluded that the news media do not succeed in listening to the experiences of young South African citizens or in creating enough opportunities for them to make their voices heard and participate in policymaking. Thus the media contribute to the general sense of disengagement and powerlessness that these young people already experience in their relation to the state. However, younger generations do not display an amount of media use that is significantly greater than that of the older generations (Wasserman & Garman, 2014), nor are the young more active in legal, political, or community organizations. In fact, Mattes and Richardson's (2015) findings suggest that the younger, post-apartheid African generation 'is less committed to democracy than their parents or grandparents' – which is different from what can be said about their respective usage of media. One of the questions this dissertation raises is whether this applies to Namibia and, if so, to what extent; and I will try to answer this by examining how young people get engaged in politics and democracy – and meaningfully engaged – with the help of mobile social media.

It should be said, by way of general background, that on the African continent democracy was built around key institutions and processes such as the constitution, free media, and regular elections, which were meant to ensure the participation of citizens in democracy and that their voices are always heard.

2.8   NAMIBIA, NEW MEDIA, AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

2.8.1   Demographical Overview

Situated in SADC, Namibia has a population of 2,113,077 according to the latest available census results, which date from 2011 (the census is carried out every 10 years). Out of this number, 1,091,165 people are female, while 1, 021,912 are male. Over 57 per cent of the population is made up of economically active citizens aged between 15 and 59 years, and 23 per cent are aged between 5 and 14 years. More than half of the total number of citizens – 57 per cent – live in rural areas, while 43 per cent reside in urban areas. The country is divided into 14 political regions; Khomas, with a population of 342,141, is the most densely populated urban region; it is followed by the Ohangwena region, with 245,446 residents – the most densely populated rural region. The least populated region is Omaheke, which has 71,233 inhabitants.

Namibia gained its independence from the South African colonial regime on 21 March 1990, after its first UN-supervised democratic elections, which were held in November 1989. The winner in these elections, with a two-third majority, was the SWAPO Party – that is, the South-West African People's Organization – and its leader, Sam Nujoma, became the founding president of an independent Namibia and its first democratically elected chief of state. The presidential and national elections of 1989 were followed by regional and local authority elections, which were held for the first time in 1994, after the formulation and gazetting of the Regional Councils' Act and Local Authorities Act in 1993. In both elections, conventional media such as television, radio, newspapers, and public rallies served as platforms of interaction with electorates.

The country is a multi-party democracy; it has 17 registered political parties that always take part in national elections at all levels – regional and local authority elections as well as presidential and National Assembly ones (ECN, 2015). By act of parliament, all these elections are held every five years. The last presidential and National Assembly elections were held in November 2014 and, again, the SWAPO Party won with a two-third majority. Its candidate, Dr Hage G. Geingob, is the current president of Namibia. The latest regional and local authority elections took place in November 2015.

The SWAPO, which is the ruling party, is also a dominant party in Namibia. Next after it in popularity and importance come the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA) of Namibia, the Rally for Democracy and Progress (RDP), the Congress of Democrats (COD), and the National Unity Democratic Organization (NUDO). Other parties are not that popular but take part in elections, and some of them win a few seats in parliament or at local government level. Here is a comprehensive list of them:

- the All People's Party (APP);
- the Christian Democratic Voice Party (CDV);
- the Democratic Party of Namibia (DPN);
- the Monitor Action Group (MAG);
- the Namibia Economic Freedom Fighters (NEFF);
- the National Democratic Party of Namibia (NDP);
- the National Unity Democratic Organization of Namibia (NUDO);
- the Republican Party of Namibia (RP);
- the South West Africa National Union of Namibia (SWANU);
- the United Democratic Front of Namibia (UDF);
- the United People's Movement (UPM);
- the Workers' Revolutionary Party (WRP) (Republic of Namibia, 1990, 2004).

Table 2.1 *Percentages of the population aged 3+ with access to ICTs in 2011 (by type of service and geographic area)*

Type of ICT service	Namibia	Urban	Rural
Radio	68.6	74.0	64.5
TV	36.7	67.1	13.8
Computer	10.5	21.2	2.5
Cell phone	52.6	68.6	40.6
Telephone (fixed)	6.4	12.2	2.0
Newspaper (daily)	8.9	18.2	1.9
Newspaper (weekly)	16.2	26.5	8.5
Internet (daily)	5.4	10.7	1.4
Internet (weekly)	3.4	6.3	1.1

Source: NSA, 2014: 47.

2.8.2   The Postcolonial Legacy and the Media

After independence, Namibian citizens were granted constitutional rights and freedoms that they then started to exercise – in particular freedom of speech and the right to belong to a political party of their own choice, as stated in the national constitution (Republic of Namibia, 1990, 2004). The media are regulated under the Broadcasting Act 9 of 1991 and the Communication Commission Act 4 of 1992. The Namibian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), Namibia's public broadcaster, is a state-funded institution and *New Era Newspaper* is a state newspaper. There have been, and are, many other newspapers and media houses, but the most popular newspaper in the country is *The Namibian*. For many years, this newspaper made it its business to bring into the open and expose facts that politicians did not want the public to know. For this reason it was criticized by politicians from the ruling party, and in the end the government forbade the newspaper to advertise government tenders and vacancies for quite some time. This was an infringement of citizens' freedoms.

Table 2.1 presents a few results from the national census taken in 2011 (NSA, 2014). As mentioned already, this is a government exercise carried out every 10 years and mainly designed to keep planners and policymakers abreast of major statistical developments in the country. One of the main elements of the census is the socioeconomic status of the Namibian citizens. The table shows that the majority of Namibians (69 per cent) have access to radio, which is slightly higher (74 per cent) in urban areas. Mobile (or cell) phones are much more widespread across the country than landline telephones and access to them is about eight times greater than access to telephones. However, access to other ICTs, for instance computers and the Internet, was fairly limited, particularly in rural areas.

The census report is not clear about distribution by specific age groups, with the result that we cannot tell how many young people have access to social media platforms. However, mobile phones appear to be on the increase in Namibia. This prompts an important question: Are digital political participation and civic engagement becoming a reality in Namibia with the arrival of mobile phones?

Table 2.2 *Online presence of Namibia's political parties*

Party	Website	Social Media Presence
Swapo	www.swapoparty.org www.spyl.com.na	Facebook: Swapo Namibia (4,997 friends); SYL* (14,539 members) Twitter: @SPYL-Namibia (422 followers) @ SWAPO Party (93 followers)
Rally for Democracy and Progress (RDP)	www.rdp.org.na	Facebook: RDP Namibia (3,996 friends) (478 likes) Twitter: @RDPNamibia (30 followers)
Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA), renamed Poplar Democratic Movement (PDM) on 4 November 2017	no website	Facebook: DTA of Namibia, also renamed Popular Democratic Movement (PDM) on 4 November 2017 (42 likes, now 5,041; 5,155 follwers as of 17 June 2019); DTA (PDM) Youth League (33 members, now 356 members as of 17 June 2019) Twitter: @dtaofnamibia (11 followers)
United Democratic Front (UDF)	no website	No Facebook or Twitter presence
National Unity Democratic Organisation (NUDO)	www.nudoofnamibia.org	Facebook: NUDO of Namibia (276 likes) NUDO Youth League (113 likes)
All Peaple's Party (APP)	www.app.org.na	no Facebook or Twitter presence
Congress of Democrats (CoD)	no website	Facebook: Congress of Democrats (104 members)
Republican Party (RP)	no website	no Facebook or Twitter presence
Swanu	www.swanu.org.na	Facebook: Swanu of Namibia (137 likes) Twitter: @SWANU_Namibia (2 followers)

Note: There are two apparent SWAPO Party Youth League pages on Facebook. The one headed SWAPO Youth League appears to have official backing. Sites were reviewed in April 2014.
Source: IPPR, 2014: 3.

2.8.3   Political Parties and Social Media

Judging from the reviewed literature, all the political parties that participated in the 2014 elections also campaigned vigorously through new media to sell their political manifestos and responded actively to the comments or questions they received from the public. This is true of the SWAPO of Namibia, the DTA of Namibia, the NUDO, the RDP, and other minority parties (Republic of Namibia, 2014; see also the list of political parties and their social media presence in Table 2.2). In 2014 the SWAPO Party still dominated in terms of numbers of members. And, for the first time in the Republic of Namibia, the national elections were conducted through an electronic voting system.

Table 2.2 reveals presence on social media on the part of some of the political parties of Namibia. The number of members and likes on these pages has increased quite significantly since 2014. This shows that a 'digital politics' is possible in Namibia if we empower citizens to become digital citizens and digital political consumers.

Although Namibia gained its independence from the colonial regime as far back as in 1990, one can claim that there is still little genuine freedom in the public sphere in this country. This space is heavily dominated by the ruling party in the form of SWAPO policy documents and SWAPO coverage of news, for example, and suffers from biased reporting, since most of the managers and leaders of public media houses are SWAPO Party members. The then minister of ICT made exactly this point at the time (Kaapanda, 2012: 24); and media guru Gwen Lister concurred by observing that, if 'at least 80% of our people want to see what government is doing', this shouldn't be taken to mean they want to be spoon-fed a selective 'truth' via government public relations agencies; they would much rather have access to incisive and independent reporting about the affairs of state and their real impact on the national development agenda. This is a clear message that we have to identify new platforms, which citizens can use to discuss public issues freely (Lister, 2015; Namibia, 2008; Keulder et al., 2010).

Judging from Lister's (2015) article, most of the youths who are actively engaged in political and public debates are members of the SWAPO Party; only a few signed up to minority parties such as the NUDO, the RDP, and the DTA. Those who disagree with SWAPO Party leaders are disciplined and suspended, in accordance with the party's statute (Namibia, 2008; Keulder et al., 2010).

It should also be mentioned that there is an observed tendency for political parties' posts to go viral on social media a few months before the elections. However, as a Namibian citizen and youth, I had plenty of opportunity to notice that the presence of political parties, or even of their leaders, on social media after elections is not that high. What remains to be seen is whether citizens, regardless of their socioeconomic status, political affiliation, and technological limitations, participate in online discussions at regional and local governance level in spite of the constraints of a political environment so tightly controlled by the ruling party.

2.9   NAMIBIAN YOUNG CITIZENS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Only a little more than 10 percent of Namibia's population of 2.1 million people is on Facebook; and a large part of this percentage consists of 18–35-year-olds. Many Namibian political parties have websites (see Table 2.2) and a social media presence on Facebook. Few have a social media presence beyond Facebook (Namibia, 2004, 2008; Peters, Winschiers-Theophilus, & Menecke, 2015). The numbers of 'likes' and of members have been increasing significantly in recent years see also Figure 2.1).
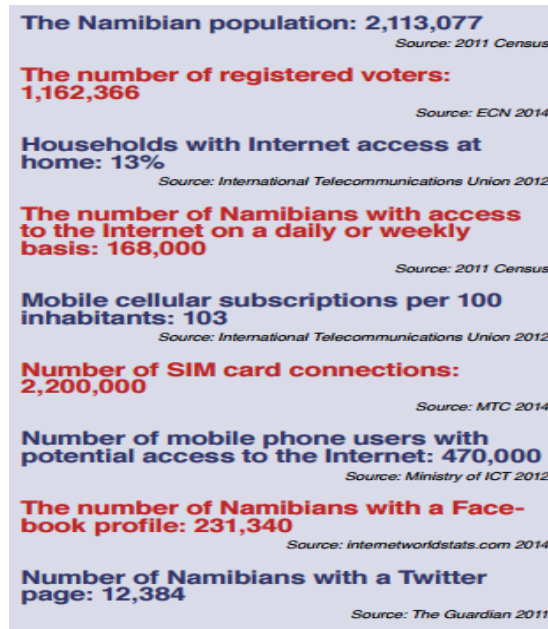
Source: IPPR, 2015a: 4.

Figure 2.1 *Namibian population: Internet and social media profile*

According to Peters et al. (2015: 2),

> Namibia's 2.1 million strong population has a median age of 21 years old; and the
> provisional voter registration results released by the ECN in mid-March 2014 shows
> that 44 per cent of registered voters are Millennials – that is, young people between
> the ages of 18 and 32. With such a large youth vote, indeed, political players should
> be appealing to the audience that could have the greatest say and sway in the
> election outcome.

The fact that political parties and candidates have an online presence, for example through
a website, and communicate on social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram
allows us to get some insights into how they interact, how they engage and discuss policy
issues with their electorates, how they respond to questions and criticism in a public space,
and whether they are moving with the times or not – for example, whether they keep the
pace with changing trends in digital media technology.

2.9.1   Namibia Facebook Users Statistics
Figure 2.2 shows the number of Facebook users in Namibia as of 20 June 2015. According
to this figure, 91.5 per cent of these users were above the age of 18 and the dominant age

HIGHLIGHTS

Facebook users 18+ represent **91.5%** of the overall users, compared to **91.9%** of the previous period

In the past **3 months** the **Male** Facebook population in **Namibia** has changed by **0.9%** while the **Female** population by **2.1%**

The most popular **Age/Gender** segment is **Male 18-24** with a **18.6%** market share

The **Age/Gender** segment which experienced the highest increase was **Male 13-17** with **5.6%**

The demographics **Age segment** that has experienced the highest growth in the past **3 months** is **13-17** with a **5.6%** increase

AGE

Age	%
13-17	8.5%
18-24	36.2%
25-34	31.3%
35-44	11.2%
45-54	4.7%
55+	8.1%
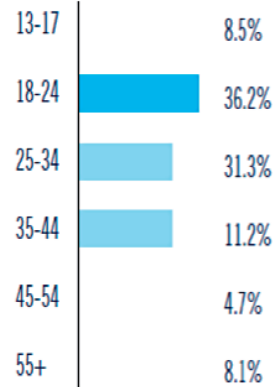
Source: All in 1 Social, 20 June 2015.

Figure 2.2 *Statistics of Facebook users in Namibia during the months of April, May, and June 2015*

group was 18–24. So much for age. As for gender, 50.1 per cent of users were male while 49.9 were female.

In their research on cultural influences on Facebook users in Namibia, Peters et al. (2015: 25) found that,

> in general, Namibian participants indicated that they felt like they had more freedom on Facebook to openly express opinions, speak their mind, and use like buttons to agree with controversial political topics. Many Namibian participants indicated that they discussed controversial government decisions or proclamations intensively on Facebook and that this was an extension of their level of comfort with discussing such topics openly in the real world.

This shows that, if the young are active and political leaders develop a good, mutual and responsive relationship with them, digital citizen engagement can become a reality. And here I should point out that, during the time of writing this dissertation, there was no other research on the topic of young people's participation in politics through mobile phones. This is the first study to explore the issue.

2.10 CONCLUSION

Various studies have been conducted on topics related to the one investigated in this thesis – topics such as political engagement, youth activism, social media and youth, digital citizenship and e-governance, and political consumerism. Most of these studies either look at the general population or infrastructure development or are based on western countries. I believe that a specific study on Namibian youth and its use of one type of device can contribute to a much clearer understanding of how the implementation of e-governance policies in various countries and the proliferation of mobile phones can affect the type and level of citizen engagement in regional and local governance politics.

The next chapter focuses on the methods I used to collect, analyse, and interpret the data for this dissertation.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

3.1   INTRODUCTION

This chapter explains how I conducted my research. It does so by presenting an outline of the research design itself and of the methods I used. I begin by discussing the qualitative research design together with my chosen strategy of inquiry. Next I describe the larger context to which the present study belongs, in order to anchor my methodological approach in a wider worldview and make its significance clearer. The chapter ends by presenting the tools I used for conducting the semi-structured interviews, the focus group discussions I organized, and the guidelines I followed in developing my questions.

3.2   QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN AND EXPLORATORY STRATEGY

Qualitative research is primarily concerned with subjective stories and accounts; these encompass the understandings, feelings, opinions, values, and beliefs of the people and communities that are part of the study. Qualitative approaches gather and work with data that are constructed by the research participants and subsequently interpreted and structured by the researcher, as part of the analytical process (Jenkins, Bloor, Fischer, Berney, & Neale, 2010; Welman & Kruger, 2001). Qualitative researchers use open, exploratory research questions and place great emphasis on understanding the phenomena in their own right. They use special strategies for enhancing the credibility of the research design and data analysis (Maree, 2016).

   As already stated and explained in the Introduction, the main aim of this study is to answer one broad question: How do young people in rural Namibia engage in politics through mobile phones? It also formulates three subordinate research questions, the answers to which will lead to this aim. All three questions are related to the specific medium under research – the mobile phone; they concern the kinds or people who participate in local politics through mobile phones and what motivates them; the nature of this participation, especially where young people are involved; and the extent and kinds of connection with the government and other stakeholders that these people can make through the use of mobile phones. The methods I chose were dictated by the goal of answering these and related questions in the best possible way.

   My study was exploratory in nature insofar as it tried to discover what participants thought and felt about the research topic and, more generally, to gain insight into the everyday life experiences of young people. Maree (2016) stated that exploratory qualitative research tends to be primarily inductive, as it begins with specific observations from which patterns and regularities are detected that enable us to formulate some tentative hypotheses; then, if we explore these hypotheses, we may come to develop some general theory on their basis. This type of research tends to work with emerging theoretical frameworks rather than with established theories or sets of hypotheses deduced from existent theories.

But the most important feature of exploratory research is that it is more common in areas where research is scant or the researcher is trying a new angle or perspective on the topic (Maree, 2016). According to Shank (2006), exploration is necessary when the research community as a whole lacks a clear picture of what is going on. In the same spirit, Maree (2016) observes that researchers 'explore' when they have little or no knowledge about a phenomenon, group, process, activity, or situation. This suits the context of my research very well. We know that very numerous studies of political participation, political engagement, mobile phones, social media, and the youth were conducted in Africa and in the global North; but very little is known about how young Namibians engage in regional and local politics through their mobile phones – and, as I have already argued, it is imperative to find out more about these activities, about how youths and their regional councillors interconnect, and so on. Hence an exploratory study on this topic recommended itself.

I employed, then, an exploratory qualitative research design in order to inquire into a set of attitudes, opinions, and feelings entertained by young citizens aged between 18 and 35 years towards what constitutes my major theme – how they use mobile phones as a tool for engagement in the political processes for effective public service delivery in the Ohangwena region – as well as into their corresponding experiences in this area.

Mobile phone subscriptions in Ohangwena have been increasing in the past few years. In 2011, out of the 43,723 households registered in the region, 23,247 (53.1 per cent) owned a mobile phone; this was already a good indicator of mobile acquisition. As for rural areas in the region, which counted 37,404 households, 51 per cent of these – that is, a number of 19,263 households – owned a mobile phone, according to the census report for the same year (NSA, 2014). But some constituencies ranked rather low: in Omundaungilo, for example, only 370 (32 per cent) out of a total 1,169 households reported to own a mobile phone in 2011 (NSA, 2014). Currently mobile phone access in the Ohangwena region as a whole has reached the much higher rate of penetration of 70 percent (NSA, 2014).

In these circumstances, I selected for my research and analysis seven Facebook pages and two WhatsApp groups. The Facebook pages relate to the following bodies:
- the Okongo Youth Club;
- the Ondobe Youth Forum;
- the Ohangwena Regional Youth Forum (this is an umbrella organization that covers all youths in the region);
- the Omulonga Constituency Youth Forum;
- the Omundaungilo Youth Group;
- the Okongo Deltas Youth Trust; and
- the Oshikunde Constituency Youth Forum.

The WhatsApp groups relate to the two constituencies of Oshikango and Ohangwena. This material was selected because the protagonists involved had high participation rates

and carried active discussions on various issues. I requested the administrators to add me to their respective groups and organizations, so I could observe both facts related to the participation rate and the discussions themselves. My role as a researcher was clearly explained to group members; I was introduced to them as a doctoral student and a fellow young citizen in search of solutions to the problem of political youth engagement in the region. I personally participated in various discussions on these platforms.

Next, in order to establish how participants in my study 'make meaning' or draw meaning from a specific phenomenon, I followed an interpretive approach based on themes and codes drawn from ethnographic data. I did so by analysing their perceptions (Creswell, 2014), attitudes, understandings, knowledge values, feelings, and experiences, in an attempt to approximate their own construction of the phenomenon of interest. According to Godhard and Melville (2001: 34), qualitative research requires 'a commitment from the researcher to see the world through the eyes of the author, other person or the subject'. Both Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2003: 234) and Cooper and Schindler (1998: 234) posit that a qualitative researcher interprets the data by giving them meanings, by 'translating' or making them understandable, and that this is what makes them relevant to the topic under study. In drawing my own methodology, I took all these views on board. When analysing descriptions of the participants' political engagement through mobile devices, I came to see that participants had different manners of using such devices; so I took a thematic analysis approach to explore these different kinds of engagement and to identify major patterns that characterize the relationship between online and offline political participation. Thematic analysis was chosen because of its appropriateness for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns that capture salient distinctions in a dataset (see Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.3   DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

In order to understand exactly how young Namibian citizens engage in regional and local politics by using their mobile phones, I also employed a number of qualitative research methods in collecting the material, in analysing the data, and in interpreting my findings. The data for this study were collected using participant observations of regional youth forum (RYF) meetings, semi-structured interviews with selected members of RYFs, focus group discussions with selected members of RYFs, and semi-structured interviews with selected regional councillors from the Ohangwena region. The minutes of the RYFs' meetings and the analysis of the two WhatsApp groups generated rich data for this study. Additional data were collected through photographic documentation about the participants' cell phones, more specifically the type of mobile phones they owned and the applications they installed on them; and I also enquired into the reasons why they had chosen those applications. But first I asked for their permission to take pictures of their phones, once they indicated during the interviews that they own a mobile phone.

I also conducted a qualitative content analysis of the constituency youth forum (CYF) Facebook pages of seven selected constituencies, as well as of the Ohangwena RYF Facebook page. The data collected by quantitative methods were qualitatively interpreted using thematic analysis, which relates closely to the inductive analysis design. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within a corpus of data or dataset. Minimally, it organizes and describes one's dataset in rich detail. However, it often goes beyond this level and interprets various aspects of the research topic – in this case, mobile phone use for political participation. A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents it as some level of patterned response or meaning within the dataset. In an inductive approach of this sort, the finds – that is, the themes identified – are strongly linked to the data themselves (Patton, 1990), which is why this form of thematic analysis is akin to grounded theory. With this method, if the data have been collected specifically for the research (e.g., via an interview or a focus group), the themes identified may bear little relation to the specific questions that were asked of the participants. Nor would they be driven by the researcher's theoretical interest in the area or topic. Inductive analysis is therefore a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a preexisting frame or into the researcher's analytic preconceptions or preferences. To sum up, thematic analysis involves performing searches across a dataset – be that a series of interviews, focus groups, or texts – to find repeated patterns of meaning. A compendious discussion of each tool will be found in the sections that follow.

3.3.1   Ethnographic Participant Observation

The oldest formal type of participatory fieldwork is ethnography (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). In this type of study, the researcher participates over a longer period of time in the lives of the people he or she is studying, in an attempt to see the world from their cultural perspectives and to understand the meanings embodied their rituals, cultural artefacts, and activities. According to Van Maanen (2011: 220, 'ethnographical research requires the researcher to spend time (sometimes a number of years) immersed within the research context, seeing and hearing the data at first hand'. Maree (2016) explained that ethnography is concerned with understanding and describing meaning in social life. It involves recording social behaviours in as much detail as possible, to capture their complexity. Ethnographers try to discover and interpret what is significant about social practices. As a research instrument, the researcher stands at the centre of this process by recording and interpreting what people say, what they do, and what artefacts they create or leave behind. In this type of research the meaning of a message is assumed to be reflected in various modes of information exchange, format, rhythm, and style, as well as in context, time, space, and other features (Maree, 2016). However, the disadvantage is that researchers may become so emotionally involved as to lose the ability to assess the situation accurately (Ellis & Levy, 2010).

To begin answering questions concerning how young people engage in political discussion, both online and offline, my first methodological port of call in this dissertation has been ethnographic fieldwork, in the form of participant observation of RYF meetings in the Ohangwena region. Spradley (2016) defined observation as the act of watching social phenomena in the real world and recording events as they happened. In social science research, observation is divided into participant and simple. Participant observation originated in social anthropology and was subsequently used by ethnographers; in recent years it has spread more widely, being adopted in social science and new media research (Blanche, Durrheim, & Painter, 2006). Orlikowski and Baroudi (1991) proposed three main reasons for using participant observation in a research study: first, researchers are less likely to try to impose their own social reality and interpretations on the social world they are studying; second, this method sometimes gives them access to areas that could not be studied in normal circumstances; and, third, it can help them to understand very specific matters, such as why specific practices occur and how they originate and change over time.

I spent seven months in the field, between March and September 2016, collecting relevant data from youths in the Ohangwena region who were members of the RYF or the CYF using participant observation as a data collection instrument. In this way I became immersed in the everyday life experiences of the people I studied. The advantage of doing this is that I gained insights about these people and their behaviours that could not have been obtained in any other way. I participated actively in local political discussions online, via Facebook and WhatsApp platforms, since I am from the same region. My observations were focused on these youths' discussion of how they used their mobile phones to participate in regional and local political activities. As a preliminary, I contacted the chief regional officer (CRO) in the Ohangwena Regional Council and obtained permission to conduct research in the region. The CRO informed the regional councillors and the RYF chair about my presence in the region (see Appendix A).

I have attended a total of six meetings, held at the Eenhana Youth Center (in the Eenhana Constituency) and at various locations in the constituencies of Ondobe, Omundaungilo, Oshikango (Edundja), and Oshikunde the regular venue was a boardroom in each constituency. All participants were actively involved in discussion and debate. The duration of a meeting ranged between one hour and three hours, depending on the agenda. The participants, who represented their constituencies, were a mixture of men and women. Their number per meeting ranged from 8 to 16.

In that setting, I took a role that allowed me to be a participant observer in the context of my research, in other words to be a researcher as well as a participant (for this type of participation, see Jenkins et al., 2010). I kept a reflective diary and my reflections became part of the data that I worked with. I made descriptive notes about what was happening at the meetings I attended. The aim was to investigate how the members of this RYF engage in offline and online political discussions and to explore the nature of engagement, the

activities it involved, and so on. As stated by Blanche et al. (2006), ethnographical studies tend to take a long time. However, it is possible to design a shorter study, which focuses for a period of weeks rather than years on an organization or group of which the researcher is already a member. My fieldwork was of middling duration; it extend over a period of seven months, from March to September 2016. This was possible only because I am a native of the region where I collected my data.

Participant observation was carried out during six RYF meetings and during other events organized by the RYF in the Ohangwena region. The aim was for me to get a sense of these youngsters' access to traditional and mobile media, of their general interests and motives for using all these media, and of any affordances and accessibility issues that hampered the specific use of these media for effective participatory democracy. I observed both public spaces such as constituency offices, households, roads, shops, petrol stations, and crossroads and communal spaces such as villages, for the purpose of creating a record of traditional and mobile media usage in the everyday life of the region, and I gathered much valuable knowledge in the process. Some participants emerged as key informants and guides, providing further insight into, and ideas about, the daily use of media in the region.

To ensure validity in the collected data, I only collected what needed to be collected. Although participant observation is time-consuming and very complex, I ensured that the data collected were sound and reliable by interviewing as many participants from different backgrounds as I could, until their stories started repeating. All meetings' discussions were audio-recorded by the research assistant. This measure was intended to facilitate the development of proper transcripts that could be used during the stages of analysis and interpretation.

3.3.2   Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviewing creates an opportunity for direct interaction between the researcher and the research participants; for this reason it is one of the main data collection methods in the arsenal of social science researchers. Used as a data collection method, interviews can differ according to various criteria, for example in terms of the degree of standardization within and between interviews (Creswell, 2014).

The present dissertation used semi-structured interviews with selected RYF representatives, other stakeholders that dealt with youth programs, and regional councillors in the Ohangwena region. This distribution reflects the intention to make sure that my data come from a variety of research settings. Semi-structured interviews are most typically associated with the collection of qualitative social material when the researcher is interested in people's experiences, behaviour, and understandings and in how these categories are formed, or why the participants experience and understand the social world in this way and behave as they do (Blanche et al, 2006). I was int.erested in both the content of the

interview conversations and the way participants expressed themselves, especially the specific language and words they used.

Between March and September 2016 I interviewed 65 young citizens (45 male and 20 female) aged between 18 and 35 years. All of them were members of the youth forum. My aim was to find out how these young people engage in regional and local politics by using their electronic devices, what motivates them, and more generally what is the nature of their participation in politics. Using semi-structured interviews with them as part of my study gave me the advantage of being able to talk to them about how they managed their personal life (Creswell, 2014) and enabled me, as the interviewer, to exercise sensitivity to their needs when the conversation veered towards potentially distressing subjects.

Most youngsters, namely 50 of them (35 male, 15 female) had smart phones with Internet access, while a few had simple phones that could be used only for calling and messaging. This figure is very high, despite the fact that the majority of people in rural areas were unemployed and had limited sources of income, as well as poor network connectivity. It is worth listing here some of the more popular brands: Samsung Galaxy Young, Samsung Galaxy Core Prime, Samsung Duos, Samsung GTS6312, Huawei y360, Samsung Galaxy Star, Huawei Lite, Sony Expedia, Ztecs and Xiaomi 4. Such phones are mainly available from businesses, retail companies, and multinational chain stores such as Pep, Dunnes Stores, Shoprite, Tusk Mobile & Electronics, Jet, and various Chinese and Indian shops (e.g. Sanzi or Shop 10 in Oshikango Plaza; Ezzy or Shop 4 in the Nandan Complex). In Namibian dollars (NAD), prices vary between N$200 and N$500 for a brand new phone, but a second-hand one can be cheaper.

I further interviewed six regional councillors, which is exactly a half of their group; there are 12 of them. Regional councillors had a busy schedule and hence not all of them found the time to take part in the research, as I had planned. Most of the interviews with councillors took place in their offices; occasionally we used my car, moving alongside the road as they were heading to meetings in other constituencies. The interviews took anything between 25 and 45 minutes, depending on what was discussed. They were all audio-recorded by a research assistant, while I was taking notes in the reflective diary. I wanted to find out how the councillors connect or communicate with the young people in their constituencies. All councillors had smartphones.

I designed an interview guide (see Appendix C and Appendix E) intended to help me to conduct the semi-structured interviews. Unlike a questionnaire, an interview guide is not simply a list of questions to be worked through (Jenkins et al., 2010); it acts as an agenda for the interview and has additional notes and features that should aid the researcher. Semi-structured interviews present some disadvantages: data gathering is time-consuming, large amounts of raw data may be generated, and participants may focus on issues that are not of interest to the researcher (Blanche et al., 2006). However, I tried to counteract these features, for example by collecting as many relevant data as possible, for quality interpretation.

On the positive side, the use of semi-structured interviews further allows the interviewer some latitude in how the questions are asked and in what order, while all interviewees are still asked the same set of basic questions (Shank, 2006). I prepared a list of eight critical questions (see Appendix C), and the most important one was always asked at the start of the interview. The remaining questions were used as a checklist.

I list here some of the questions that were put to regional councillors (see Appendix E). Could you share with me the level of your participation in community issues? How do you connect or communicate with them? How do you respond to political protests to proposals that you are advocating on social issues, if you were involved in any? Supposing you have a few minutes to talk to young people about the use of mobile phones as a tool for engaging in regional and local politics, what would you say to them? What are the socioeconomic and political challenges your region is facing if you initiate political discussions with the youth? What strategies do you think need to be developed to overcome these challenges? Do you think that mobile phones play a key role in facilitating the interactive relationship between citizens (the youth) and political representatives? If so, how?

Interviews with young citizens were held in various constituency boardrooms – except at Ondobe, where they were conducted in the building of Ehafo Supermarket, as I obtained permission from the shop manager to use a small office inside the shop. The duration of an interview varied between a minimum of 20 minutes and a maximum of 30 minutes. Participants were recruited through a referral procedure whereby the researcher asks the forum's chairperson to invite active members to come and attend the interviews, after having circulated information among them. I explained the main purpose of the interview to the chairperson; then the chairperson explained it to members, before they turned up for the interview. I also asked the chairperson to invite all the members of the forum. I interviewed at least four or five participants a day. Each one received a cool drink and a biscuit at the end of the interview. Participants were told to wait outside, as they had to come in one by one. When they indicated that they had Facebook accounts, I asked if I may invite them as friends and follow their discussions on the platform for two months. They all granted me permission to do so.

Here is a selective list of the questions I addressed to young people (see Appendix C): Tell me, do you find mobile phones useful for communicating with and connecting to your fellow young people? In your opinion, as a young citizen in this region, do you think that the mobile phone can motivate you to communicate, interact, and share information with government officials and other senior officials in the region? What defines political participation for you, both offline and online? Do you think there is a difference in political participation between young citizens and adults who were involved in the liberation struggle?[1] Do you think that other fellow young citizens in the constituency have participated?

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1   The latter are those who participated in the struggle for independence of Namibia, both inside and outside the country. Namibia became an independent state in March 1990.

All semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed. Where recording was not possible, field notes were taken during the interview and then fully written down as soon as possible after the interview. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Most of the interviews, meetings, and events were in Oshiwambo[2] and were subsequently translated in English.

3.3.3   Qualitative Facebook, Mobile Phone, and WhatsApp Pages Content Analysis

Qualitative content data analysis is defined as a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns (Maree, 2016; Creswell, 2014; Badenhorst, McLeod, & Joy, 2012). This is supported by Tracy (2012) who explains that content analysis is typically performed on various forms of human communication, expressed for example in books, newspapers, films, television, art, music, videotapes of human interactions, transcripts of conversations, and Internet blog and bulletin board entries. Content analysis has previously been shown to be an effective and suitable methodology in the study of Internet-based content, including that of political websites and blogs (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). It goes beyond merely counting words or extracting objective content from texts in order to examine meanings, themes, and patterns that may be manifest or latent in a particular text; it allows researchers to understand social reality in a subjective but scientific manner. Zhang and Wildemuth (n.d.) contended that qualitative content analysis usually produces descriptions or typologies, along with expressions from subjects that reflect how they view the social world. It uses inductive reasoning, whereby themes and categories emerge from the data through the researcher's careful examination and constant comparison.

In Namibia, the Mobile Telecommunication Company (MTC) sells recharge vouchers with pre-loaded data bundles for Facebook, WhatsApp, and Internet connectivity. This means that, if a someone who has a smart phone buys a N$5.00 voucher, that person will have free data bundles for Facebook, WhatsApp, and Internet connectivity; and, as already mentioned, 50 out of the 65 young people who participated in this study had smartphones. Additionally, MTC is running a free hour promotional campaign for Internet usage from midnight on. Many young people make use of this opportunity to connect and communicate with their friends during this hour. The Facebook application is freely downloadable from the Internet. But other helpful Facebook applications, such as Facebook Free Basics, are not available in Namibia, hence Namibian users cannot access them from any of their mobile phones.

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2   Oshiwambo is a language spoken in the Northern Namibia. It is made up of several dialects. In Ohangwena, most people speak Oshikwanyama, since they fall under the Oukwanyama Traditional Authority. A 'traditional authority' is a type of authority where the traditional rights of a dominant individual or group are accepted, or at least not challenged, by subordinate individuals (Ritzer 2011: 132). There are 51 recognized traditional authorities in Namibia, and the Oukwanyama Traditional Authority (OTA) is one of them. People under this authority speak the same language, which is known as Oshikwanyama.

This study followed an inductive conventional qualitative content analysis approach, in which the coding categories are derived directly and inductively from the raw data. Here is how I proceeded.

During semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, I asked a few selected young citizens with smart phones and regional councillors to allow me to access their Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups. Once they gave me permission, I sent them a 'friend request' and they added me to their groups through these groups' administrators. I followed these pages from March to the end of September 2016; and I recorded all the issues discussed that pertained to my research topic. Additionally, I obtained permission to access the Ohangwena RYF page, which I followed over the same period. All in all, I participated in discussions carried out on the Facebook pages of the seven groups already listed in section 3.2 – the Oshikunde Constituency, the Ohangwena RYF, the Okongo Youth Club, the Ondobe Youth Forum, the Omundaungilo RYF, the Okongo Deltas Youth Trust, and the Omulonga CYF; and I also participated in WhatsApp groups in the region, especially those that were targeting the young people under the RYF – namely those of the Oshikango Constituency Youth Forum and of the Ohangwena RYF.

The population for this part of my research consisted in the Facebook pages of the forums and in the two WhatsApp groups. The unit of analysis was the number of times a word would appear in a sentence.

The ethnographic analysis was also enriched with a qualitative content and textual analysis of online discussions. It is important to note that there is a certain dynamic around membership of Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups, in that members are more likely to be supporters of one political party or organization. This means that there is a good chance that they are already positively inclined towards the party or organization in question, and this may affect comments accordingly. During the period of this research, I identified more than 20,000 comments and statuses with around 18,000 likes and 98 videos that were shared from these pages and groups. Every status update provided by each member was scraped using the netvizz software system, along with every comment made on these pages by any Facebook or WhatsApp friend or member. Once texts were scraped, they were exported to a database and entered into the text-based sentiment software, WordStat. This program made it possible for me to track the most common keywords, terms, and phrases. After that, I used ATLAS-ti software to code the data. I also prepared an inductive analysis of the data: the main purpose of this operation was to allow themes to emerge from a constant comparison (Boeije 2002; Maree, 2016) of the dominant or significant themes inherent in the raw data, without the restraints imposed by a more structured, theoretical orientation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Each interview, Facebook, and WhatsApp group Word document was repeatedly compared with other groups or page documents, to show whether other themes emerged, until all themes were exhausted (at least to my knowledge). To protect the identity of participants, I changed all their names and those of the constituencies they

represented. Where constituency names are mentioned, their occurrence reflects the researcher's observation or is based on census results. A note here is in place: since the census is made once per decade and the last one took place in 2011, the general statistics reported here are those of that year. The next census in not due until 2020.

3.3.4   Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussion is a qualitative data collection method that usually brings together a group of five to twelve people. These people have something in common, namely something connected to the research topic, and are invited to take part in a discussion on that topic that is facilitated by the researcher (Blanche et al., 2006). Shank (2006) defined the focus group as 'a group of people whom you interview at the same time' (p. 48). Participants join an organized discussion that takes between one and two hours and is often based on a single specified topic. The data generated within a focus group are relatively unstructured and use the words and concepts of the participants themselves. In most cases focus groups are used to find out how people experience and understand the issues raised by the research topic. Unlike semi-structured interviews, focus groups provide an opportunity for people to explore and challenge the experiences and opinions of others and to reflect on their own within a facilitating environment; and much of what happens within the group depends on the participants.

Williams (2011), Newman (1994), and Maree (2016) emphasized that focus group discussions are especially useful when the time to collect data is limited, when people feel more comfortable talking in a group than alone, when interaction among participants may be more informative than individually conducted interviews, and when the researcher would like other people's assistance in interpreting something he or she has observed. One of the strong points of focus group discussions, especially in qualitative research, is that they do not discriminate against people who cannot read and write; hence they encourage participation (Maree, 2016). The moderator has the opportunity to encourage full participation and interaction among members and may also use probing to steer the discussions or to clarify certain aspects (Creswell, 2014; Blanche et al., 2006).

To get the attitudes, opinions, experiences, and views of young citizens in the Ohangwena region on how youths engage in regional and local politics with the help of their mobile phones and on how they connect and communicate with the councillors, both online and offline, the study used focus group discussions with selected members of the Ohangwena RYF, in addition to the semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted first, as they gave me a preliminary picture of the experiences of young citizens and of how they use mobile phones and social media as political tools for participation. But in order to reach the group's understanding and use of these devices and of social media for in-depth political participation, I have organized focus group discussions. This could be done because all participants in the study shared something that was pertinent to the topic at hand.

Two focus group discussions with representative youths from the RYF were set up. Each focus group had 12 participants but not all were present (three youths had other commitments at the time of these sessions). Meetings were held during the research period, March–September 2016, and only on Saturdays, to ensure that even participants with job commitments could attend. Each participant was asked to state his or her first name, so that I may keep track of who said what during transcription (Shank, 2006). A microphone was placed at the centre of the table, to ensure that the results are quite good. The venue used for the focus group discussions with representative young people from the Ohangwena RYF was the Eenhana Youth Center located in the middle of the Eenhana Town, which is the capital of the Ohangwena region. While in Okongo, I used a room in the constituency office. I made sure that the room was prepared well before the arrival of the first participant and that the assistant researcher was available to welcome the participants and give them a name badge. A flip chart was used to highlight the most important topics and issues during the discussions. Reminders were also send to the Okongo Youth Club and to the forum's chairperson every third day. Light refreshments were served after the sessions.

An audio recorder was used to record the proceedings and capture verbal cues that may escape the moderator's notice. Transcripts and reflective notes (Rubin & Babbie, 2010) were written in a question-by-question format immediately after each session; they dealt with what has been observed during the focus group discussion session. An assistant was employed who recorded his own observations; this measure was designed to add value to the collected data and to enhance credibility (Maree, 2016) of the study. Although focus group discussions can produce rich, detailed data that are otherwise difficult to obtain, some participants may experience such groups as threatening (Maree, 2016). Hence I explicitly asked group participants to respect the confidential nature of the information shared within the group (Jenkins et al., 2010).

3.3.5 Thematic Data Analysis

There are various qualitative analytical methods that can offer different insights into the set of data collected by a researcher. Two of the more commonly used methods are the thematic approach and the narrative approach. Since they are distinct but complementary data analysis methods, combining them can enable a more holistic understanding of the phenomena under investigation (Shukla, Wilson, & Boddy, 2014). While thematic approaches are particularly useful for looking across cases, as they highlight commonalities and differences across a dataset, the strong point of narrative analysis is the analysis of specific features, which it sets in more general contexts. This is the reason why I have decided to use both these methods for my data, combining them into a thematic narrative analysis (Shukla, Wilson & Boddy, 2014).

Thematic analysis is the depiction of a sequence of past events as they appear in the present to the narrator, after they have been processed, analysed, and constructed into

stories (Creswell, 2014). Narrative analysis is always analytically interpretive, while this is not inevitably the case for thematic analysis, which may be interpretive, but can also be applied for the purpose of organizing the data and generating rich descriptions. A narrative approach aims at investigating not just how stories are structured and the ways in which they work, but also who produces them and by what means, the mechanisms by which they are consumed, and how narratives are silenced, contested or accepted.

Narrative data analysis is divided into three sections: narration (telling the story); transcription (converting the story from audio format into the written word); and analysis (understanding the transcribed data and drawing conclusions). After I collected the narrative data in the form of audio recordings of each semi-structured interview and focus group discussion, I transcribed these recordings as soon as possible into a word-processor document. All audio data were transcribed verbatim. Although this operation was very time-consuming, it was extremely important for me to perform it, as it helped me to get to know the data and to prepare the story for analysis. I started my analysis of the data by reading all the transcriptions, in order to get a comprehensive overview of the narratives that I collected. Narrative analysis covers a variety of procedures for the interpretation of narratives in research; such procedures include formal and structural means of analysis (Maree, 2016). In this analysis I tracked the sequence, causality, stories, or processes in the data, keeping in mind that most narratives have to be rewinded so that the researcher can unravel in the analysis.

I used an inductive analysis of qualitative data because the main purpose was to allow research findings to emerge from frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in the raw material, without the restraints imposed by a more structured theoretical orientation (Shank, 2006). It should be noted that qualitative data analysis is an ongoing and iterative (i.e. non-linear) process: this means that in it data collection, processing, analysis, and reporting are intertwined, and not merely a series of successive steps. In consequence, researchers in this field often find it advisable and even necessary to go back to the original fieldnotes or audiovisuals to verify their conclusions, or to return to the participants consulted during the research, either to collect additional data and verify the old material or to solicit feedback, as stated by Nieuwenhuis in Maree (2016). The goal of analysing qualitative data is to summarize what you have seen or heard by using common words, phrases, themes, or patterns that would aid your understanding and interpretation of what is emerging.

As mentioned before, I used Atlas.ti to code the collected data. The program enabled me to identify, in various ways, text segments such as participants' names and socioeconomic characteristics, or assigned categories such as 'online political engagement', 'online political disengagement', 'political education', 'youth leadership transition', 'community engagement', 'youth volunteerism', 'poli-tainment'; and these generated various codes. Few of the codes produced at this stage survived my ongoing revisions and collapsing of categories and made it to the final analysis. Categories were printed again and coded again

by hand; new coding categories were tested by merging several categories and re-examining the data (Maree, 2016; Creswell, 2014). The focus of thematic data analysis is on the way in which research participants construct their story without the researcher's intervention; the researcher says little and records the story, as told by the research participant to tell it (Blanche et al., 2006).

3.4   THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The study was conducted in Ohangwena, which is one of the 14 political regions in Namibia. According to the latest census, that of 2011, Ohangwena had a total population of 245,446 inhabitants – 112,130 male and 133,316 female. The large majority of this population lived in rural areas; only 10 per cent lived in urban areas. A high proportion of this population – 46.7 per cent, almost a half – consisted of people between the ages of 15 and 59 years. The figures for those aged between 18 and 35 years were not available at the time of research) (NSA, 2014; Ohangwena Region, 2016); but, even without this information, one can conclude that there is a substantively high percentage of young citizens in Ohangwena. The rural–urban distribution among this 46.7 per cent layer shows a higher proportion of city dwellers: 18.7, which is more than a third. Still, the remaining 29.7 per cent of live in rural areas (Ohangwena Region, 2016). This clearly indicates that a very large number of youths live in rural areas outside urban centres.

The Ohangwena region consists of 12 constituencies, which have been the same throughout the entire period of this research: Engela, Ondobe, Omundaungilo, Eenhana, Omulonga, Ongenga, Okongo, Oshikango, Ohangwena, Oshikunde, Epembe, and Endola (see Figure 3.1), having been thus divided through a local authority act (Act 23) of 1992. Each constituency has a political head called 'councillor'. Regional councillors are elected democratically, in regional and local authority elections that take place every five years. The last round of elections was in November 2015. The political leader of the entire region is a governor appointed by the president of the Republic of Namibia to represent the office of the president at the regional level (Ohangwena Region, 2016). The administrative head is the chief regional officer of the Ohangwena Regional Council.

The graph in Figure 3.2 shows that, in 2011, 69.9 per cent of the people living in Ohangwena had access to the radio, 10.2 per cent had access to television, 2.1 per cent had access to a computer, 43.5 per cent had cell phones, 1.3 per cent had access to fixed telephone, 12.2 per cent could buy or access online the newspapers, and only 2.6 per cent had daily or weekly access to Internet. It is clear that the large majority of residents in the region had no regular access to Internet. One should add that, on the whole, residents in rural areas tended have less Internet connectivity than urban residents (Ohangwena Region, 2016).

Total Population		Urban Localities	
Ohangwena	245 466	Eenhana	5 528
Eenhana	21 089		
Endola	25 591		
Engela	24 271		
Epembe	16 229		
Ohangwena	17 468		
Okongo	25 698		
Omundaungilo	7 855		
Ondobe	23 954		
Ongenga	22 075		
Oshikango	28 635		
Omulonga	32 581		
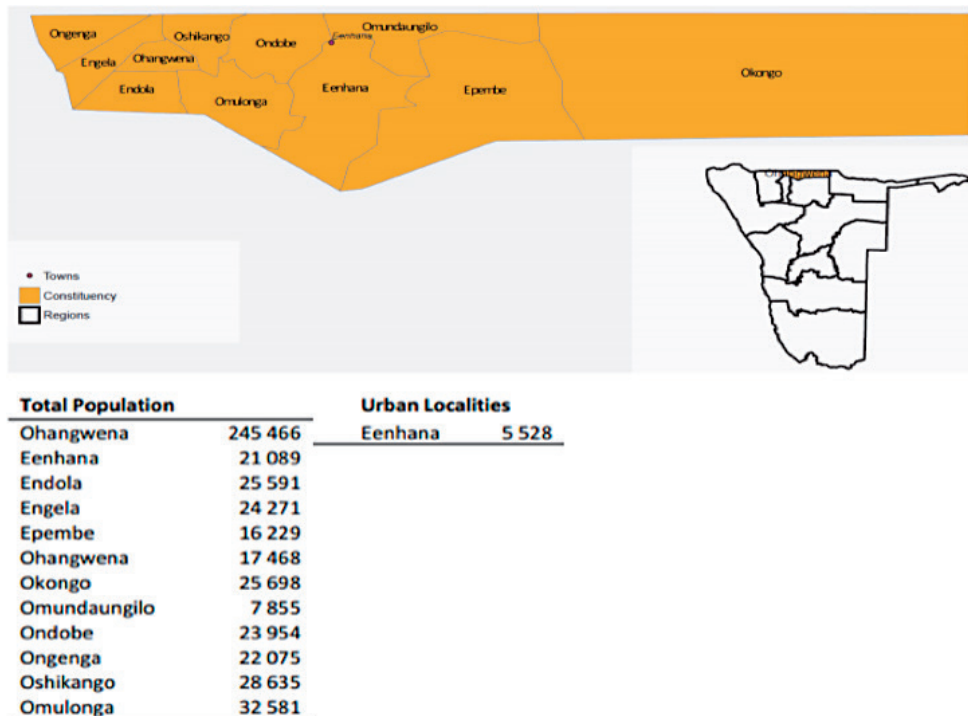
Source: NSA 2014: ii.

Figure 3.1 Regional map of Ohangwena and the population in each of its constituencies

Even if the situation has improved somewhat since 2011, the very low percentage of people with Internet access makes it all the more important to look closely at the situation of mobile devices and to put mobile telephony at the centre of a study of the relationship between old and new media and the circulating discourses and practices across the digital and the physical sphere. If only 2.6 per cent of the population had Internet, 43.5 per cent had mobile telephony. Also, if we consider the rural–urban distribution again, 63.5 per cent of the urban population had cell phones, by comparison to 41.3 per cent in rural areas. Participants in my study were from across the whole demographic range – unemployed and employed youngsters, full-time and part-time students, rural and urban residents – and represented all racial categories in the region.

A few words about these participants and their main forms and structures of organization are in order here. My dissertation focused on 18–35-year-olds from the Ohangwena region – people who can take part in elections at the regional and local authority level. Some participants were voters older than 35 years: these took part in the study in order to present their views on how youths use mobile phones to engage in politics. Fixed-term elections

	Radio	TV	Computer	Cell phone	Telephone (fixed)	Newsapaper (daily&weekly)	Internet (daily&weekly)	Don't know
■ Ohangwena	69.9	10.2	2.1	43.5	1.3	12.2	2.6	0.9
■ Urban	75.3	36.2	8.1	63.5	4.4	32.9	8.2	1.3
■ Rural	69.3	7.3	1.4	41.3	1.0	9.9	1.9	0.9
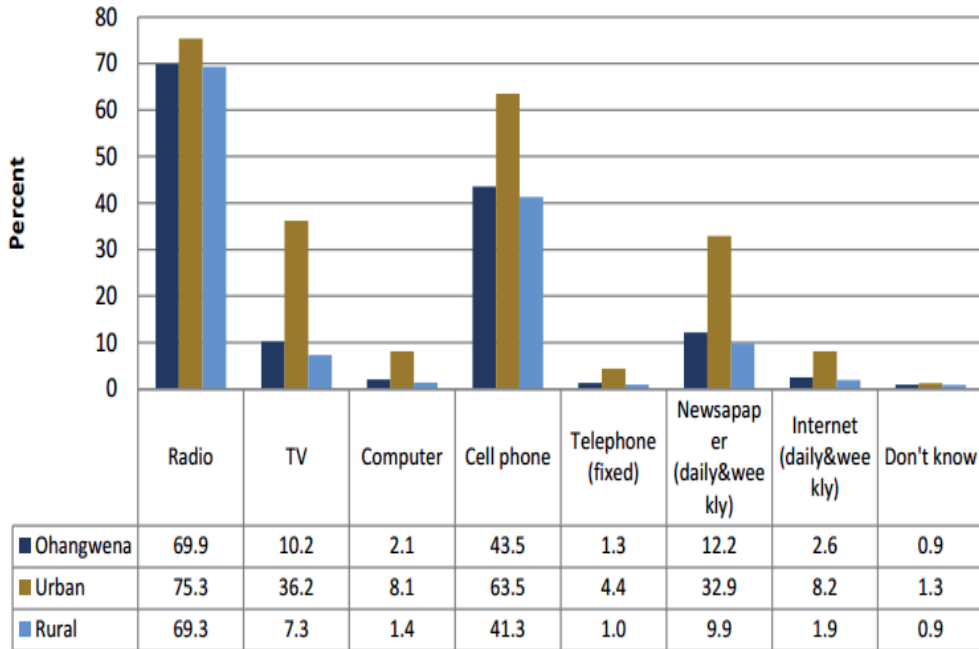
Source: NSA 2014: 19.

Figure 3.2 Access to ICT facilities in Ohangwena in 2011

give the electorate an opportunity to vote for its representatives at the regional level of government, and this should foster development in their respective constituencies.

The youths in my study were all members of the Ohangwena RYF. The RYF is a structure of the National Youth Council and in this capacity upholds the latter's aims and objectives. It is an umbrella body for all the youth groups in the region. The RYF is made up of CYFs, which are structures from each constituency in the region. CYFs aim to empower the young people through skill development, health education, counselling, and services and by providing information. In addition, CYFs are essential resources that enable young women and men to initiate actions that promote their own development and that of their communities and broader society.

Through the National Youth Council Act no. 3 of 2009 (for its text, see Republic of Namibia, 2009), RYFs are established in each of the 14 political regions and 102 constituencies of Namibia. The Act stipulates that the forum is mandated with certain responsibilities: it 'coordinates activities of the youth in its region' as it 'is the immediate representative' of the National Youth Council at regional level; it 'reports to the Representative Council once a year'; and it 'must receive financial support from the [National Youth] Council based on the terms and conditions determined by the youth council Board' (40.2). The Act further stipulates (40.3):

A regional youth forum consists of –
  (a) representatives of youth organizations and associations at regional level;
  (b) representatives of constituency executive committees; and
  (c) a regional conference that sits every fourth year and consists of
      (i) all members of regional executive committee;
      (ii) seven delegates from each constituency forum; and
      (iii) all regional youth officers in the region as observers.

The next point in the Act (40.4) concerns the forum's conference: '[e]ach regional youth forum, at its regional conference, must constitute its regional executive committee to administer the affairs and activities of the forum'. This committee 'consists of (i) all chairpersons of constituency youth forums; (ii) four additional members elected by the regional conference; and (iii) all regional youth officers in the region who are members by virtue their office but have no right to vote'. At the regional conference RYF members 'must elect the office bearers of the regional executive committee', which consists of a chairperson, a vice-chairperson, a treasurer, and an administrative secretary. And, as the Act goes on to say, '[a] member of a regional executive committee serves for a term of four years of office, subject to a maximum of two terms'. These officials are elected regardless of their political affiliation to the regional executive.

Since a political region is divided into constituencies (for Ohangwena's 12 constituencies, see Figure 3.1), the Act also states (41.2–4) that each constituency should establish a CYF that 'coordinates' the activities of young people within its remit, serves as an 'immediate representative' of the RYF at the constituency level, and reports to the RYF. Like a RYF, a CYF should hold an annual conference that elects its own executive committee – a body that 'conducts the affairs and activities of the forum for a term of two years'. The other major task of the annual conference is to 'elect the office bearers of the constituency executive committee', namely a chairperson, a vice-chairperson, a treasurer, and an administrative secretary (see also Republic of Namibia, 2009: 21–3).

RYFs report directly to the chief regional officer – the regional executive – and, at the political level, to the regional governor. The forum' chairperson or vice-chairperson should be present at every meeting or discussion that takes place, to represent his or her fellow youths. Taking this organizational structure as a basic premise, this dissertation looks at how political engagement of youth is shaped through an ongoing negotiation between the two entities of the youth forum and the relevant regional authority.

The forum is made up of members from different constituencies in Ohangwena who serve as representatives of the youths in their respective constituencies. In 2011 the regional executive team numbered 76 members: 72 representatives of the 12 constituencies (six from each one) and 4 members appointed at the regional level to represent the interests of their fellow youths. Additionally, each constituency was supposed to have a functional

and active youth club that works directly under the RYF. This means that youth clubs are reporting to the RYF on their progress and on the activities they are engaged in. However, some constituencies failed to establish youth forums, while in others the youth forums ceased being active because their founders neglected them after they got jobs elsewhere.

The RYF strives for political change and development in Ohangwena by targeting the region's rural youth, with the main objective of creating platforms for socializing and information sharing. This organization prompts young citizens to engage in political discussion at the regional level, keeps them busy, particularly the unemployed and the out-of-school youth, and raises awareness on alcohol and drug abuse and on unwanted pregnancies. According to the population and census results for 2011, the regional unemployment rate was 43 per cent among youths aged 15 and older. Since then, the majority of young people went all the way up to grade 12, finishing their secondary education; some have obtained even higher-grade certificates and diplomas or are currently studying.

Most of these young people meet weekly or biweekly at their constituency offices, where the control officer usually allow them to use a small office without charging them. The youth groups they form discuss a wide variety of issues, ranging from teenager pregnancies, land distribution, and employment opportunities to project identification and political affiliation.

Many young people had cell phones in 2011, but only a few had smartphones that would allow them to use the Internet and open social media applications such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and LinkedIn. They communicated regularly via phone calls, SMSs, and, in some constituencies, WhatsApp groups. Oshikango, Ohangwena, Epembe, and Omundaungilo were among the constituencies with active WhatsApp groups. These are the groups to which I was added as an active participant by the group administrators; and I carried out analysis of WhatsApp groups for these constituencies in order to assess the level of political engagement that youths and their political leaders could reach by using new media (see chapter 7). The phenomenon is somewhat comparable to what we witnessed in the West around Facebook. It is obvious that Facebook (with help from Cambridge Analytica) played a disproportionate role in politics in the global North. In the global South, WhatsApp groups achieved a similar position of importance in stimulating political engagement (though this analogy shouldn't be pushed too far).

Additionally, young people communicate with their councillor through texts and messages sent on the mobile phone and designed to be read out on NBC Oshiwambo Radio, on a morning program named Luganda that is reserved for councillors. On this programme councillors usually announce dates of meetings with the youth or the general public, or urgent visits from government officials. This means that most of the councillors' communications, exchanges, and interactions with their communities are done through Oshiwambo Radio, which is part of the National Broadcasting Cooperation (NBC) – itself a state-funded agency. Councillors call in using their airtime allowance from the responsible

authority – the Ministry of Urban and Rural Development. Each councillor is entitled to a N$1,000.00 airtime credit per month. Most of the residents in the Ohangwena region speak Oshiwambo and listen to Oshiwambo Radio – hence its popularity among the elderly and its relevance for the transmission of political messages. Although the programme is useful, I have noticed that its timing at a very early hour – 6.00 a.m., Monday to Friday – is not appropriate. This is the part of the morning when most of the active people are on their way to work. As a result, more often than not the messages do not reach their intended audience in time.

Since more than 90 per cent of the regional population speaks Oshiwambo, councillors' meetings are always conducted in this language, to ensure that all forum members have an equal opportunity to participate in discussions. The chairperson always takes the minutes, discusses with the regional councillors the issues outlined there, and returns to the group with feedback in the next meeting. The minutes of forums' meetings have been incorporated into my data analysis for this dissertation. The idea was to look at the political discussions and narratives of the youths in the region. The selection was based on the criterion of active participation in RYF activities, which explains why only youths from eight constituencies – Ondobe, Eenhana, Oshikango, Oshikunde, Okongo, Omulonga, Epembe, and Omundaungilo – are part of my study.

These constituencies were selected for specific reasons. Two of them, Ondobe and Eenhana, are semi-urban constituencies. Oshikunde is a newly created constituency and its councillor is also a member of parliament (MP), which means that this councillor is most of the time in Windhoek, more than 700 km away from the region (NSA, 2014). Epembe and Omundaungilo have poor network connectivity and radio frequencies, but mobile phones are more widespread in these constituencies, which makes them interesting sites for this dissertation. Ondobe, Eenhana, Okongo, and Oshikango are urban constituencies and most of their communities or villages have access to a reliable network (see chapters 4 and 5).

3.5   CONCLUSION

3.5.1   Summary: Highlights

In this study I applied participant observation to forum meetings in order to get a sense of the kind of interests and concerns that animate the youths and the causes they are engaged in, the hierarchies in place among them, who are the key people and who are the followers, who are the diehards, who are the regulars, and who are the casual members – in short, the politics of participation.

I also conducted semi-structured interviews with selected groups of youngsters. This was done through informal discussions with youths from the Ohangwena forum and from other CYFs in the region, but not just on social media. The interviews explored attitudes to

politics in general, matters of interest, curiosity, and concern for young citizens, examples of protest, and the participants' relationship with and perception of the government.

Government officials and other stakeholders were selected by reason of their function as key stakeholders and government representatives at grassroots level: these people are tasked with being public servants, and in this capacity they have a duty to listen to the problems and suggestions of youths and take them up to the executive, for possible solutions.

RYF members were purposively selected. This is a qualitative study; hence it belongs in a category generally associated with small, in-depth research designs that are based on the collection of qualitative data. My aim was to explore and interpret the everyday life experiences and perceptions of participants with mobile phones in the region under research (Welman & Kruger, 2001). Hence participants were not chosen at random, as in quantitative research; they were chosen with the purpose of answering my research questions and testing my hypotheses against their relevant experiences – that is, experiences related to the use of mobile phones for political engagement. The qualitative method enabled me to research my topic in depth.

This research looked at relationships, negotiations, the circulation of discourses, engagements with geographies, and the influence of mobile telephony on political life. The thematic themes that emerged gradually from this material and drove the design of data collection tools are political engagement, online and offline political participation, political interest, accessibility, digital literacy, and motives (and rationale) of joining social media. More details about data collection tools are discussed in sections 3.3.1, 3.3.2, 3.3.3 and 3.3.4 of this chapter.

3.5.2 Summary: Timeline

The present chapter has discussed the research methodology used in this study. It also explained my choice of a qualitative approach and perspective. Qualitative methods were best suited to the exploratory and interpretive aspects of the research, which in essence involved discovering the meaning of a specific phenomenon by analysing its various perceptions. I will end the chapter with a brief timeline of how the methodologies presented here unfolded.

The research began with ethnographic participant observation, which was carried out at three RYFs meetings in the Ohangwena region as a preliminary stage. Participant observation was followed by 65 semi-structured interviews with selected representatives of young people from the RYF in Ohangwena; then, on the basis of information gathered in these interviews, two focus group discussions with selected youths were organized. Next I conducted semi-structured interviews with the regional governor and six constituency councillors of Ohangwena; these were meant to explore how young people use their mobile phones to interact with regional councillors on local and regional political issues. Finally, I

organized focus group discussions with representative youths from the RYF. Information from the focus groups proved to be a great aid.

Since this study is about country-wide political engagement through the media, old and new, but particularly about engagement facilitated by the mobile phone, most participants were Namibian citizens aged between 18 and 35 years, hence eligible to take part in political discussions constitutionally as well as most likely to integrate mobile telephony into their lifestyle. Some older and a few younger citizens took part in the study too.

The next chapter surveys the use of old media by young citizens in the context of regional and local politics and civic engagement, and especially by comparison with the use of new media.

3

CHAPTER 4

Old and New Media*

4.1   INTRODUCTION

With the advancements in mobile technology that we witnessed in the past three or four decades, especially the emergence of smartphones and non-smartphones, which combine features of radio, television, and Internet (e.g. by giving access to online newspapers and by offering content- and news-sharing applications such as Facebook and WhatsApp), political participation at regional and local governance levels is anticipated to change (Schugurensky, 2016). Hence this chapter explores the views and experiences of young people from Ohangwena as to how mobile media influence political participation and determine preferences in the region, given the popularity of these devices as well as their affordances.

Several studies carried out over the years have claimed that traditional media continue to be, to this day, powerful transmitting belts and conveyers of political information for the marginalized and rural natives in various communities of the global South, although, with the rise of mobile phones, they have seen a decline in popularity among the youth (Bell, 1981; Buckingham, 1999; Chadwick, 2013; Fallows, 1996; Robertson, 2013; Loader, Vromen, & Xenos, 2014). The decline is specifically attributed to the proliferation of mobile devices in this layer of the population because they offer a two-way communication channel. The studies mentioned here were looking at traditional and new media as public spaces for information sharing, communication, debate, and participation in public affairs and political activities in various countries; and they reached the conclusion that, in all the countries covered, both the old and the new media strengthen democratic rights and the freedoms of citizens.

Most studies on new media in conjunction with the global South take it for granted that the new technologies are creating new forms of political engagement and that this is a process of replacing old media forms and practices. But this chapter tries to demonstrate something quite different – namely that this is not an evolutionary process of the old giving way to the new, but a case of new hybrid practices that enable political engagement. Most of the earlier scholars based their arguments on Habermas' public sphere theory, where the public sphere is equated to the national space and the latter provides an autonomous and open arena for public debate, guaranteeing free access and freedoms of assembly, association, and expression (Habermas, 1991). Today this theory has been repurposed as a theory of the virtual public sphere, since that is the place where inclusive democracy is believed to happen (Papacharissi, 2002). McBride (2015) explained that inclusive democracy is a form of collective action that can allow citizens to see themselves as sharing the ownership of the political institutions that shape the context of their lives, be it at the regional or at the local level. The premise here is that an *informed* citizen is an *empowered* citizen (Schrock, 2015).

The present chapter targets the hype around the element of novelty in new media and aims to debunk this notion of a shift from old to new, embracing instead the complicated forms in which all media, new and old, work together to create the empowered citizen. In this study, 'participation' refers to reading news on media, creating news by commenting on media stories, sharing and discussing the news via social media with friends and relatives, voting, and taking part in political campaigns and protests that may all lead to activism (Catlaw, Rawlings, & Callen, 2014). I examined how traditional media combine and integrate with new media to strengthen these kinds of participation. Previous studies have looked at the low reading habits related to traditional newspapers, especially from the angle of citizens' trust and distrust in traditional media by comparison to new media (Kling, 1996; Negroponte, 1998; Patterson, 1996). We know little, however, about the sources that rural Namibian youths trust when it comes to political information; and we know little about their expectations from the old media and practices around them. By investigating these issues through young people's own narratives and practices, I reveal a complex set of cultural norms that the new media bypass (and, from a certain angle transcend), as they allow for the temporal suspension of the hierarchies that have long dictated political communication between the rural constituents and their local council representatives in this region.

4.2   HYBRID AND TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING

There has been a new wave in the manufacturing industry of mobile phones in recent years: the development of mobile devices endowed with the capability to access the Internet as well as to enable watching TV news, listening to the radio, and reading newspapers and other current affairs online (see Louho, Kallioja, & Oittinen, 2006). This development gave rural citizens access to some of the facilities that were considered luxuries in the early 1990s, for example television – although there are villages, and even townships, that do not have the access frequencies needed for these devices and their networks. The dual function of mobile devices as tools for communication and information created a niche market for young citizens who are prepared (or even eager) to use their mobiles not only to communicate but also as enabling devices that can bring transmission closer to them. On the negative side, having this kind of option is known to bring down the sales of printed newspapers and TV sets, especially in developed countries (Pauwels, 2005). However, in developing countries such as Namibia, where income disparity is greater and network infrastructures poorer, citizens are still heavily reliant on both print and online media, so that the two support each other. Generally in the global South they are complementary tools, not competing ones.

4.3   NAMIBIA'S MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Like other countries in the Southern African Development Commission (SADC), Namibia is governed and directed by its constitution, which enshrines freedom of expression and freedom of the media. There are several media houses in Namibia that report political news, and they, in turn, abide by the country's laws and legislations. Like many other countries of the world (see Downey and Fenton, 2003), Namibia has experienced a growth in localized forms of mass media such as community radio, television, and newspapers.

The traditional media that are widespread and familiar in Namibia are the following:

   A. *Radio*   NBC's radio services consist of 22 stations in different languages such as Oshiwambo, Afrikaans, Silozi, Rukavango, Damara/Nama and various community radio stations such as Ohangwena Community Radio, which operates three TV channels and eight radio services. NBC broadcasts FM radio in the country's official language, which is English, as well as in Afrikaans, which functions as a sort of lingua franca, in German, and in the regional languages of Ovambo, Damara/Nama, Rukwangali, Setswana, Herero, and Silozi. All radio stations are streamed online, too (Cameron, 2013; Fox, 2012; Kavari, 2013).

   B. *Television*   Namibian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) services (public broadcaster); One Africa (private). The NBC is a public broadcaster established in 1990 to replace the South West Africa Broadcasting Corporation (SWABC), which was operating before Namibia's independence that year.

   C. *Newspapers*   Nearly all newspapers are privately owned. The largest selling newspaper is the *Namibian*; the Afrikaans-language daily, *Republikein*, comes second. *New Era* is owned by the government.

4.4   YOUTH ACCESS TO OLD AND NEW MEDIA IN THE OHANGWENA REGION

As already mentioned in chapter 3, the Ohangwena region has a relatively young population. About 44 per cent of its residents are under 15 years of age, while the population of working age (15–59), which has a strong component of young people, too, constitutes about 46 per cent. By comparison to other Namibian regions, Ohangwena also has the highest number of youths living in rural areas (NSA, 2014; Ohangwena Region, 2016). Table 4.1 shows that the region totalled 43,723 households, of which 37,404 were located in in rural areas.

Table 4.1 also maps the distribution of specific communication assets, both by constituency and for the region as a whole, on the basis of the census results for 2011. Between a half and two thirds (69.9 per cent) of residents had access to radio, the figures

Table 4.1 Distribution of communication assets in Ohangwena by household, in 2011. Asset-owning households are counted by constituency. Oshikunde is not included, as it was only a village at the time; the survey was taken before the demarcation of constituency boundaries.

Area	Households	Radio	Television	Telephone (Fixed)	Telephone (Mobile)	Computer/ Laptop	Home Internet Connectivity
Ohangwena	43.723	32.455	5.125	825	23.247	1.297	498
Urban	6.319	4.460	2.475	219	3.984	687	178
Rural	37.404	27.995	2.650	606	19.263	610	320
Eenhana	3.982	2.961	722	77	2.137	302	45
Endola	4.654	3.701	648	101	2.965	153	26
Engela	4.903	3.657	1.050	133	3.383	148	42
Epembe	2.568	1.672	42	50	862	4	1
Ohangwena	3.153	2.389	561	41	1.741	135	56
Okongo	4.773	3.544	235	57	2.549	64	19
Omundaungilo	1.169	802	19	49	370	15	1
Ondobe	3.851	2.687	204	59	2.125	69	49
Ongenga	3.887	3.102	427	42	2.049	84	22
Oshikango	5.378	3.883	926	139	2.573	255	163
Omulonga	5.405	4.057	291	77	2.493	68	74

Source: NSA, 2014: 120.

indicating slightly greater access in urban (75.3 per cent) than in rural (69.3 per cent) areas. But, in spite of the high percentage, it is not yet clear how youths access and this medium. This chapter aims to explore the matter of whether young citizens use the radio and other traditional media to participate in regional and local politics – and, if so, how.

Also in 2011, mobile phones were much more widespread across the region than landline telephones: the ratio between them was 43.5 per cent to 1.3 per cent (NSA, 2014). Almost a half of the households owned a mobile phone. However, access to other modern information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as computers, laptops, and Internet-enabled components is very limited, particularly in rural areas. Some constituencies appear to be technologically disadvantaged; thus the Omundaungilo constituency had 1,169 households, yet only 1 household (0.08 per cent) had home Internet connectivity, only 15 households owned a computer or a laptop, and no more than 370 households (32 per cent) owned a mobile phone. The situation has not changed much to date.

Access to newspapers, not included in Table 4.1, was also very low in 2011: only 12 per cent of the population had daily or weekly access to a newspaper (NSA, 2014).

4.5   ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This section presents fieldwork findings related to both old and new media. The main aspects to be discussed here are access to these media, their popularity, the affordances they offer, and the preferences they command among young citizens interested in politics. It goes without saying that these findings are confined to the Ohangwena region.

To understand young people's usage of old and new media for political engagement, we need to look at their media practices more generally. Given that digital media constitute a relatively novel sphere of action for this demographic, it is important to capture which media are popular, what their appeal is, in other words, why youths prefer *these* platforms, and at what point exactly the switch from personal to political occurs. My findings reveal that it is not useful to create a dichotomy between 'the personal' and 'the political' when it comes to platform preferences, for we are dealing here with hybridized practices.

Overall, the findings indicate that young people listen to the public radio mainly for music and other entertainment and prefer private or community radio stations, because those incorporate music into their programmes. But, although radio was found to be widespread in the region, not many youths appeared to listen to it. Respondents further indicated that television is less accessible to young people than radio and that printed newspapers get looked at mainly for job opportunities and for relaxation, when people have nothing else to do. Due to the portability of the mobile phone, young people prefer accessing mainstream media (including newspapers) online, via their mobile gadgets, despite the region's poor network coverage of political news (which is itself a symptom of the digital divide). In a nutshell, old media are less familiar to the youth, and this causes the marginalization or even exclusion of rural youngsters from public debates that presuppose the acquisition and sharing of political information, although old media content does get recaptured and shared on new media – for example in the form of newspaper clippings or short TV video clips, which can go viral on social media platforms.

Fieldwork led me into the three key areas on which I focus on in this chapter. My work in these areas corresponds to the following research questions: Which media are the most popular among young citizens who wish to engage in politics, and how are they accessed? What are the reasons for this popularity and preference? What are the challenges and obstacles faced by young citizens when they attempt to use these media for regional politics?

4.5.1   Public Radio Less Popular for Political Engagement

Radio has been available to residents in this region for quite a long time; it is a popular medium, especially with the elderly (see Table 4.1). Citizens listen to NBC Oshiwambo Radio[3]

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3   NBC Oshiwambo Radio was renamed Kati FM in 2018.

for news, announcements made by the councillors, political messages, entertainment shows, and cultural programmes. They believe that radio enables them to know what is happening in the country and in the world at large.

One of the programmes on NBC Oshiwambo Radio that are popular with the residents of this region is Lungada (already mentioned in the previous chapter). This is a special programme running from 6 to 7 a.m. on weekdays. It is reserved for government and other officials (including youth leaders) who have urgent announcements such as job opportunities in their respective constituencies, villages, or offices, pension distributions, various meetings, and other topical matters that need the public's attention. The programme was allocated its early time slot by the management team, according to what the station's daily broadcasting schedule permitted. Councillors and other officials call in by using their own credit. Each official has a limited time of up to three minutes to make his or her announcement(s); so these messages to the public must be clear and to the point. NBC presenters encourage councillors and other officials to announce only urgent matters every day. There is also a programme called *Eyakulo lOshiwana* (*Public Announcement Programme*) that runs from 9 to 10 a.m. on weekdays and from 8 to 9 a.m. on Saturdays, with the somewhat complementary purpose of giving the general public an opportunity to air its messages and announcements. The NBC Oshiwambo Radio station can be accessed via various Namibian mobile radio applications whose sizes range from 1.58MB to 4.8MBs; so all such applications can easily fit into any mobile phone. However, these applications do not support offline radio. To be used, they require Internet connectivity.

The next best used radio station is a private one, called Ohangwena Community Radio (OCR). This station is managed in part by the Ohangwena Regional Council, together with the Eenhana Town Council and with the support of some other donors such as UNESCO. OCR offers some programmes that enable their audiences to participate in debates on certain topical issues such as land distribution, the HIV/AIDs pandemic, teenage pregnancies, and youth empowerment in the region. This radio station does not have its own mobile application, is not available on any of the other mobile radio applications in Namibia, and its programmes cannot be downloaded on other platforms such as YouTube. Some youths indicated that they prefer listening to this station because it plays 'nice music', but not necessarily for political information.

This converges with, and supports, Bosch's (2014) findings on community radio journalism in South Africa – namely that the country's residents have always considered community radio practices participatory, primarily because stations are usually owned and operated by community members and on-air presenters. As Bosch shows, community radio projects emerged from the political and cultural struggles of the 1980s against apartheid in South Africa: in these struggles radio was perceived as having the potential to inform and mobilize communities. Here, however, I wish to extend the notion of community beyond its utilitarian application to purposeful projects – such as building relationships and networks

for political engagement and empowerment – into the sphere of emotive and affective relations. Community media were found to serve as a forum for individual entertainment, which may not have an immediate or direct impact on community building. For instance, my respondents indicated that the community radio station does not really focus on youth engagement in civic and political activities, as most of the time young listeners consume it only for the entertainment offered.

Although this community radio is streamed online on Facebook and can also be accessed via mobile phones with built-in radio, it is only available to people who live in nearby towns; and OCR station frequencies cannot be reached from all areas of Ohangwena. These findings are inconsistent with Bosch's claim that community radio stations are intended to give previously marginalized groups access to the airwaves, since the marginalized communities in Ohangwena cannot access this community radio.

Some of the councillors remarked that they also send announcements to Omulunga Radio, in order to ensure that those who do not tune in to OCR or to NBC Oshiwambo Radio receive the message too. Most of Omulunga Radio's programmes are in Oshiwambo. Omulunga Radio station frequencies, just like those of OCR, are not reachable throughout the whole region.

While visiting the Okongo Village Council, I met Moses, a 19-year-old forum member, with whom we discussed the status of young people's participation in public affairs in the region (among other issues that affect the youth). I asked Moses which medium he considered to be best suited to conveying political messages to young people in this community. And I received this reply:

> Radio is better, as some youth can access it via their mobile phones despite the poor frequencies and connectivity in some areas of the region … most of the youth have access to them [*sc.* mobile phones] sometimes.

This observation reveals that, despite poor radio frequencies and connectivity in the region, young people tend to prefer using the mobile Internet and rely on it more than on listening directly to the radio. This belies the widespread image, so popular in the international development community, of rural youngsters listening collectively to the radio. Clearly personalized consumption is a not just a western cultural habit (Karuaihe-Upi & Tyson, 2009; Mchakulu, 2007; Moyo, 2012). According to Moses, 'some villages in the region still do not have reliable radio frequencies'. In villages such as Epinga, Onamafila and Ondama-yOmunghete, residents have to climb trees to catch the right frequencies that allow them to listen to the news or get the messages delivered by their political leaders.

Moses also argued that connecting or listening to politicians or councillors on the radio is not really about political interest, but about *employment* – about *survival*, since politicians are the source of job opportunities, the state being the dominant employer. The second big interest is to get the latest news on death announcements and on old age pension

distributions in the region. The most important finding in this narrative is how, in this context, politics merges the state and the market. Conventionally, in the West, politicians and the market are separate estates; but in developing countries such as Namibia we are reminded that the two reinforce each other, complicating what constitutes political issues (O'Neill & Harsell, 2015).

According to Moses, the region's poor radio frequency makes it difficult for people to listen to the radio regularly; in most cases they receive old news, and even that comes by chance, if they happen to go into town. Additionally, the timing of the programmes used by councillors and other leaders is a problem. Most of the young citizens I interviewed complained that for people with regular jobs, this programme comes at the exact time when they are on their way to work. For those who remain at home, this is the time to take the animals to nearby boreholes or water points. Therefore the messages often fail to reach the intended audience. However, councillors said that they cannot do anything to change the timing, as this programme is addressed not only to the residents of Ohangwena but to all the people who listen to NBC Oshiwambo Radio in Namibia. It is worth noting that radio programmes from this station cannot be downloaded even if the young people's mobiles have the capacity to store them.

Moreover, most of the youths I interviewed have developed an attitude that radio is just for elderly adults and rather young children. Most of them would not tune in to NBC Oshiwambo Radio or other stations to listen to programmes relevant to them even if the frequencies are available or their mobile phones give them access. Here is a statement made by 30-year-old Eliaser:

> Most of us we have radios, even on our mobiles, but the problem is we don't listen to NBC Oshiwambo Radio, we like Omulunga Radio, and the councillor uses mostly NBC Oshiwambo Radio; but, as for us, we listen to Omulunga, because we like music.

Omulunga Radio is a private radio station. Its programmes are a mixture of the latest songs and political messages interspersed with them; the latter come either from newspapers or through direct call-in by political leaders. However, politicians cannot make full use of it, since they have to use a public radio station. Both NBC Oshiwambo and Omulunga Radio can also be captured on mobiles, through built-in radios or mobile radio applications.[4] Unlike mobile radio applications, built-in radio does not require credit or Internet connectivity, as most phones come with the radio capabilities from the manufacturers. People can tune in to these stations both with smartphones and with non-smartphones, provided that there is a frequency in their area. But Eliaser's statement reveals that, even if or when NBC Oshiwambo

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4   These can be downloaded from https://m.downloadatoz.com/omulunga-radio-namibia/com.mobincube.android. sc_3ERIBY (accessed February 10, 2019).

Radio is fully available in the house or on the mobile, young people would not listen to it; they would rather tune in to stations, especially private ones, that offer live music or other entertainment. Most youngsters enjoy their music and show little interest in a state-funded radio station such as NBC Oshiwambo Radio.

One of the councillors I interviewed (see Appendix H for the whole list) shared Eliaser's sentiment that young people do not listen to the radio, in spite of the fact that this is the channel through which most of the political messages are transmitted. According to him,

> When we [*sc*. councillors] want to reach the youth, sometimes we use the radio, so we send messages, and these messages have to be read over the NBC Oshiwambo Radio, but only very few youths … listen to the radio messages or to programmes like Ewilamanguluka, Lungada … few youth listen to that. Most of them when they tune on the radio they are just interested in music or entertainment. (Councillor 4, 2016)

Given that only a few young people listen to the public radio, yet that is the mode of transmission used regularly by politicians in the region, I asked this councillor what steps he takes to ensure that his messages reach youths who do not tune in to NBC Oshiwambo Radio (or Kati FM). He indicated that councillors use various other platforms concurrently with the radio. They also have noticeboards in their offices where they paste these announcements; they hold public meetings in the villages; and they send text messages to youth forum leaders in the constituency, on their mobile phones. These messages are then forwarded by the recipients to their peers on social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp, since there is a high presence of young people on these platforms.

> I have realized that most of the youth are always on Facebook […] we created a Facebook page named after our constituency, so whenever I have something to share with the youth […] I post it there and we are always interacting with each other. (Councillor 4, 2016)

This statement is consistent with Papacharissi's (2010) claim that the new communication technologies offer information and tools that may extend the role of the public in the social and political arena. Scholars in favour of these new technologies believe that the new media create a virtual public sphere that can increase citizens' participation in public and political activities (Fallows, 1996; Patterson, 1996; Bell, 1981; Kling, 1996; Negroponte, 1998; Rheingold, 1993). They believe that social media and the mobile phone can enhance the democratic participation of young citizens.

One last point: Ardèvol-Abreu and Gil de Zúñiga (2016) concluded that, apart from trust and distrust, which are usually related to traditional media, other factors or motives may influence people's preference for new or traditional media as a news source. My findings support this view. Some of the factors and motives uncovered during my research and

presented in this section relate to distance, transport, infrastructure, taste, and accessibility of media in the community. These factors explain why, even though radio (including radio on mobiles) is generally popular in the region, young citizens tend to listen to private radio stations, for live music and entertainment, and to ignore the political aspect of radio. Those who tune in more frequently to NBC Oshiwambo Radio for news and current affairs are on average older people.

4.5.2 Television a Luxury Medium for Rural Youth Politics

In Ohangwena, television is a luxury for the few: only 12 per cent of the regional population own a TV set (NSA, 2014). Some constituencies do not receive television signals, and the shortage of electricity, critical in some remote areas, makes the situation worse. I found that only the residents of small towns or villages situated within a small radius from large towns such as Oshikango, Ohangwena, Onhuno, Ondobe, Eenhana, Okongo, and Epembe receive TV signals. Very few business establishments, typically bars in towns, have TV sets and, when they do, they use them predominantly for the sport channels. My findings dispute the conclusion reached by international research recently carried out in Spain, in the United States, and in the United Kingdom (Casero-Ripollés, Feenstra, & Tormey, 2016; Robertson, 2013). This research claims that broadcast television and the use of intense digital media boost citizens' engagement and self-mediation in politics. My findings also contradict the mediatization theory, which argues that mainstream media, particularly broadcast television, have a strong influence on politics (see Chadwick, 2013). Besides, in the case of Namibia television is simply not a mainstream medium.

Interviewees from rural areas who had smartphones indicated that they usually stream NBC News through their smartphone, although this operation uses up their data bundles. It is worth noting that not all the mobiles owned by youths have applications that allow them to watch television, and there are still some young people in the region who do this only rarely. Those who attend secondary school watch television in the classroom. Also, people get to watch television when they go for holidays in town. Affordability is a major issue of TV access, as there is an annual license fee that to be paid. Since most of the young people are unemployed, this handicap really makes it difficult for television to function as a source of political engagement.

To learn more about whether young people in the region watch television on their mobiles or share news videos and clips for political news, I spoke to Mart, a 31-year-old who has lived in Ohangwena since the 1980s and now works for the Namibian police (see Appendix G for a list of all young people I interviewed):

> They [youngsters] do not watch television, especially those who live in remote areas […] there are no TV network coverages there […] maybe only 24 per cent watch television […] some tend to ignore it and go to night clubs.

On the same topic, another young man said:

> I do not think most of the youths in Ohangwena region watch television, simply
> because TV sets are very expensive and the TV signal is very weak in most of the
> rural areas where many youth stays. (Jus, 29)

Corroborating this view, the councillor for one of the constituencies that have poor TV
signals and radio frequency stated:

> We [residents] do not have TV signals in most areas of our constituency, hence we
> cannot talk about TV news, as our youths do not watch television. (Councillor 3,
> 2016)

In urban areas and in the few other places where TV reception is available, parents are
predominantly unemployed too, therefore they cannot afford a TV set. Some also have
cultural beliefs according to which television contributes to immoral activities, for example
by exposing young people to the bad influence of sexual movies. As a result, many young
citizens are forbidden by their parents to watch television.

> In some areas where there is electricity, parents may not afford to buy a TV set, as
> they are unemployed, or have myths about TV [as] the main source of all evils. (Ag,
> 36)

Overall, this set of findings reveals that television (as well as mobile television) is not
too widespread in rural areas of Ohangwena. The reasons for its limited use are poor TV
reception owing to network connectivity; a high unemployment rate; anti-TV cultural
beliefs; and also poor electricity supply in rural areas. As for urban areas, television is not
very popular among young people in cities either. They watch especially sport news and
other entertainment programmes, and they watch these mainly from their homes, or in
establishments such as bars or clubs.

My findings contradict the current position in the literature, which treats television as a
major access tool in rural areas in developing countries: television cannot possibly perform
such a role in in Namibia, simply because most residents in these areas have no access to
television. As a result of access and affordability issues, only a few young people can get TV
news. In such circumstances, even a highly influential medium like television fails to advance
the cause of political inclusion for the marginalized communities of Namibia.

4.5.3   Newspapers as Tools for Updating Young People's Current Affairs and Employment Opportunities

Owing to its economic growth and development, Ohangwena has several shops and outlets
that sell newspapers to the public on a daily basis. The presence of Puma service stations at
Ongha, Onhuno, Omafo, and Oshikango, of a Shell service station at Eenhana (the Onawa

service station), and of four other private service stations in the region contributes to the greater availability of newspapers in the region. There were also some big retail chains such as the Shoprite U-Save at Okongo, Eenhana and the Shoprite at Oshikango, as well as Pick n Pay supermarkets at Okongo and Oshikango. Some small-to-medium retail shops sell newspapers too, for example the Onawa Mini Market, the O'Save Mini Market, and OK Grocer (a chain of special supermarkets at Ondobe, Eenhana, and Okongo). However, all these shops are aligned along two main roads: Eenhana–Erundu and Ondangwa–Oshikango. This means that only young people who live in or near these four towns or visit them regularly can buy newspapers.

I visited several outlets and retailers and found that they mainly sell the following newspapers: the *Namibian*, a daily that sells very fast in all the areas of the region (but all of them receive a limited number of copies); the *New Era* which is a state newspaper; *Die Republikein*, an Afrikaans newspaper that usually carries many job ads in both the private and the public sector, yet only a few copies of it come in, as not many people are fluent in Afrikaans. Other available papers include *Kundana*, a newly established newspaper written in Oshiwambo; the *Sun*; *Confidante*, a tabloid; and *Informante*, a tabloid sometimes distributed for free. I observed that newspapers are delivered very late, usually after 9 a.m., and sometimes do not reach areas such as Okongo before 2 p.m. The Friday newspapers sell faster than any other weekday editions, because more often than not they advertise a lot of vacancies. In some areas people have to buy their newspapers in advance, or else they would not get any. All these newspapers are available online, including on Facebook and Twitter. Young people with smartphones or mobiles that can access the Internet read them electronically; but in order to be able to do this they need to have enough data bundles on their mobiles.

Mr Log works at one of the retailers that sell newspapers in the town of Eenhana. When I enquired about his sales, he told me that, at their shop, the *Namibian* sells faster than any other newspaper, and this on a daily basis. On average, the newspaper is delivered around 10 a.m. every day. I also learned from Mr Log what newspapers his establishment usually receives every morning and in what numbers: 95 copies of the *Namibian* (250 on Friday); 5 copies of the *Republikein* (8 on Friday); 30 copies of the *Sun* (40 on Friday); and 20 copies of the *New Era* (30 on Friday).

I was interested in finding out from the sellers which age groups buy which newspapers. I discovered that newspaper buyers are, for the most part, young people and that they buy especially the Friday edition. I also spent a few days surveilling open spaces such us hiking points and recreational facilities where young people tend gather; I was on the lookout for youths reading newspapers and I wanted to observe their habits around this activity. The majority of these youths live in towns; very few come from rural areas. I noticed that only one in four was likely to carry a newspaper. During interviews, youngsters made it quite clear to me that they only scanned the newspaper for vacancies; they were not in the habit

of reading the news or anything else. Yet Vesa, a 31-year-old from Oshikango, gave me a different perspective. Vesa was reading a newspaper at a hiking point. When I asked him why he would buy a newspaper, he said:

> Well, I buy newspapers for two reasons: basically to know what is happening in the country and the world at large and to search for job opportunities.

Rega is another youth who shares Vesa's sentiment, and this is how he expressed his views about newspaper access and affordances:

> In Ohangwena, we do not have enough access to newspapers. You can only buy them at Oshikango, Eenhana, Ondobe, Okongo and Ongha. Most of the youth living in the villages have no access to this. Most of them do not even have an interest to buy the newspaper. (Rega, 29)

I spoke to one of the young entrepreneurs in the region about the sorts of newspapers he buys as a businessperson and about the reasons why he buys them. He, too, revealed more than a strictly local interest in ads:

> I buy the *New Era* newspaper daily, simply because of the construction business I am current doing and most of the government tenders are being advertised here […] I also buy the *Namibian* regularly, just to keep up to date with what is currently happening inside and outside the country. (Linga, 30)

He continued:

> To be honest, I do not like reading long stories. I always scan the stories but the short stories I finish them. I do not think most youth care about reading, especially newspapers. They only read about sport, criminal activities, fashion, entertainment, etc. Final year students and unemployed graduates scan newspapers for one reason only – jobs.

I asked Mary, a shop owner, about her views on how widespread the habit of reading newspapers was among the region's youths, and she gave me this not very encouraging outline:

> Many youth do not read newspapers as far as I know in my region. Since some have no access to them […] they mostly listen to the radio whereby constituency councillors does air some but limited information. […] People have no access to newspapers because the Ohangwena region is poor in terms of development, those who are staying at villages cannot read newspapers every day, because there are no outlets/markets that sell newspapers there. (Mary, 31)

Young people from rural constituencies such as Omundaungilo and Epembe feel technologically disadvantaged as a result of poor network coverage, and yet their first port of call for getting the latest news is the mobile phone – not the newspaper. This is quite remarkable.

My findings show that young people buy the *Namibian* and *New Era* because these two advertise more jobs and than any other newspapers. The same goes for Friday newspapers: youngsters purchase them in greater numbers because Friday issues provide more information of the kind this public is interested in. It is clear that the majority of those who buy and read newspapers do it for the sake of the latest news (local, national, and international), vacancies, tender advertisements, and entertainment pages. This conclusion is consistent with a research conducted in the United Kingdom that revealed that young people's reading of newspapers is largely focused on entertainment and sports pages (Harcourt & Hartland, 1992; Buckingham, 1999).

The findings further indicate that newspapers are not the most suitable communication platforms for transmitting political messages to the young in this region, since most of them live in rural areas, where newspapers are a luxury. In Ohangwena, newspapers serve only a few young citizens who reside in urban areas. What is more, newspapers are in short supply: daily deliveries for sale throughout the region are too small for there to be enough newspapers even for these few urban youths. Finally, most youngsters in this restricted group do not really buy newspapers for political information, but for employment opportunities and current affairs in the region.

4.5.4   Are New Media Taking Over the Role of Traditional Media for Democratic Citizenship?

Contrary to expectations, it turns out that traditional media such as television, radio, and the newspaper are a luxury in the Ohangwena region. On the whole, those who do have access to these media use them se media for information about job opportunities, entertainment, and news. These findings prompted me to ask what other media platforms young people might use to communicate, disseminate and consume information, and receive messages of a political nature. Mobile gadgets quickly appeared to be the answer.

I also asked some of my young respondents how they normally use their mobile phones. It appears that, when they have Internet access, they often use them to send or receive messages concerning youth programmes or information about the region or the country at large. This corroborates earlier scholars' conclusions on the relationship between mobile telephony and the Internet: mobile phones provide citizens with new opportunities to actively engage in the process of information production, news consumption, and civic participation (e.g. Bachmann & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013; Chari, 2013). The majority of my respondents use their mobiles to access online newspapers and social media platforms. Here is a representative answer from one of the young people I interviewed:

> Generally I use it [mobile phone] for communicating with others, mostly friends and not so much with relatives or leaders […] to download pictures and videos especially with smartphones […] also to download and listen to music […] but the original idea is to make communication easy for myself. (Lyd, 35)

Heys, another youth from the region, stated:

> With my phone I normally call my colleagues, friends and family and the application that I use mostly is Facebook because I use to get very interesting information as well as fun posts. (Heys, 25)

These excerpts validate the idea that citizen journalism of the kind advocated by Goode (2009) is possible with mobile phones, as citizens can use these devices to receive and share news, inform others, and create online new content that can be read by others.

However, my findings do not support the claim, put forth in US studies, that young people use their mobile phones (and new media in general) as news platforms as a result of growing public mistrust of traditional media and concern about the pervasiveness of biased reporting (Örnebring & Jönsson, 2004; Wagg, 2004; Javaru, 2013; Ndimbira, 2014). As my interviewees use only what is available to them, the fact that this is the mobile phone rather than the newspaper, the TV set, or the radio does not indicate that they do not trust traditional media. In response to a question about how much trust they put in television, the radio, newspapers, and social media as sources of information, some participants stated that they trust less what is being discussed on social media, since in their view some of the participants in those discussions are not serious – they are probably just joking about the issue. On the matter of trusting Facebook discussions, Hendrine, a young unemployed youth forum member, made the following comment:

> I only have trust in some posts and statuses, because not every post I see on Facebook has true information even if it is giving good images. I do not need to share it with my group because I do not trust some sources on social media because someone might just post something which does not exist at all. (Hendrine, 25)

This challenges Javaru's (2013) view that modern media are quick enough to deliver the information of generic content, but the news and issues rendered by the modern media have much less influence among the people's local issues for it is devoid of physical contact and personal feelings of a particular locality.

My findings suggest that mobile phones are a promising medium that can be well used to build political participation in the region, considering that at least 70 per cent of the residents own a mobile phone and 43.5 per cent of the population is made up of youths. While the dominant medium in Ohangwena is the public radio, only a few youths listen to it, and those who do concentrate on entertainment. The mobile phone can act as

a transmitting belt in political life because it is popular among the young and most of them already make use of it one way or another.

4.6   CONCLUSION

One major conclusion that emerged from this chapter is that, although public radio is popular in the community at large (almost 70 per cent of residents own a radio), it is not too popular among young people, especially when it comes to political engagement. The few young citizens who tune in to the radio listen mainly to entertainment and music, and for this reason prefer private stations (commercial radio) such as Omulunga Radio and OCR but do not show interest in political programmes and political news and would not listen to them even when a radio set is in the house or when they could catch radio stations on their mobile. This puts statistics into perspective.

But there is one interesting feature about young people's habits around the radio. Although network connectivity is poor in the region, when young people choose to listen to the radio, they tend to tune in via their mobile phones. This is relatively expensive for them, since most are unemployed; yet they say that mobile phone radio is better for them because they can use free data bundles from the network operators.

Another interesting conclusion is related to the fact that the most popular newspaper among the young people of Ohangwena (for those who can get it) is the *Namibian*, and mainly its Friday's edition. This is so primarily because this paper advertises a lot of jobs. However, upcoming entrepreneurs prefer buying the *New Era* for its government tenders. All the evidence suggests that the main reason why people, and especially youths, are interested in these newspapers, either in their online or in their offline incarnations, is what they offer in the areas of employment and entertainment; political consumption does not figure in the equation.

The last major conclusion to be taken from this chapter is that new media such as mobile phones with radio application and Internet are slowly replacing the traditional media platforms, especially among the youths. My interview respondents made it clear that their mobile phones give them access to social media platforms such as Facebook (Buckingham, 1999); and some of their phones have radio applications too, allowing them to switch between stations any time, wherever they are. This is another strong reason for advocating the use of mobile telephony (and of new media in general) for youth participation and engagement in regional politics.

In a nutshell, old media are losing ground not because they are unappealing in the era of social media (e.g. because of engagement issues), as is usually assumed, but rather because access to them is very limited. Relatedly, the idea that old media pave the way for new media is a myth, too: the inequality that served as a barrier to accessing the old

media continues to influence access to new media, albeit in different ways. That being said, mobile social media look promising, and the manner in which they are used indicates a potential for engagement that may turn them into powerful political tools. This chapter has also attempted to draw attention to various points where tensions around these issues resolve and where they remain.

The next chapter looks at the offline and online political engagement of young citizens in the youth forums and other political networks in the region.

4

CHAPTER 5

Offline and Online Political Networks *

5.1   INTRODUCTION

Quite a few studies carried out in the past few years indicated that there is a downward trend in youth participation in politics and civic engagement, both in the global South and in the global North (Cooper, 2014; Fu, Wong, Law, & Yip, 2016; Hao, Wen, & George, 2014; Chatora, 2012; Resnick & Casale, 2014; Malila, 2016; Yamamoto, Kushin, & Dalisay, 2016). These studies also reported that young citizens are not taking part in elections, are apathetic and disengaged, are not members of political parties, and find it difficult to communicate with their fellows in various political organizations. Namibia is not an exception in these matters. In this general context, an increase in mobile phone subscriptions in Namibia is perceived as a game changer: it could significantly increase young people's engagement in civic and political life. The aim of this chapter is to explore how young citizens' day-to-day participation in political activities intersects with their online political enactments.

The conclusion that youth interest and involvement in politics is on the wane has been met with both agreement and disagreement (Towner & Muñoz, 2016). All round, there has been much discussion of what can be done to attract youngsters into political life, offline and online – make them commit; and, again, Namibia takes part in such discussions as much as any country. But, for of all these efforts, nothing seems to move the youth in the direction of becoming politically active again, either in the global South or in the global North. Moreover, a recent study carried out by Lekalake and Gyimah-Boadi (2016) in different African countries shows that African youths are less likely than their elders to engage in a variety of political and civic activities such as voting, attending community meetings, joining others to raise an issue, and contacting leaders. Young women expressed significantly less interest in public affairs than young men, as men have greater access to education and employment opportunities; and this is part of the country's colonial legacy of unequal educational opportunities, which gave men a relative advantage in the acquisition of cognitive skills and financial resources normally associated with active political participation (Portney, Eichenberg, & Niemi, 2009). Some scholars (Resnick & Casale, 2014; Lekalake & Gyimah-Boadi, 2016) further contended that African youths tend to register in large numbers for regional and local authority elections in various countries, yet fail to turn up for the actual voting. This explains why the voter turnout is always very low in spite of registration results. On the other hand, a recent study conducted in South Africa in 2015 (Malila 2016) reveals that only 31 per cent of the youth population of this country registered and took part in 2014 elections. Such findings go to support the notion that youth participation in politics is in general decline throughout the world (Ndlovu & Mbenga, 2013; Murti, 2016; Kahne, Middaugh, & Allen, 2014; Resnick & Casale, 2011; UN-DESA, 2008; Malila, 2016; Yamamoto et al., 2016).

In Namibia, Evalistus (2015) conducted research on youth participation in the 2014 elections that took place in Windhoek, the country's capital (situated in the Khomas region);

and he concluded that most of the youths did not vote because they were not interested in political change (or in politics in general). His study posited that young people's apathy about elections was mainly caused by the fact that politicians made empty promises and, as a result, the youth as a whole felt isolated and cut off from the political process. This is one of the very few studies on youth political participation conducted in Namibia. Unfortunately Evalistus did not consider youth participation in regional and local politics or in elections for regional councils and local authorities, which were characterized by a very low voter turnout; he limited himself to exploring young people's attitudes to and perceptions of national and presidential elections. The study also eliminated rural or semi-rural areas and used only 'students' (a term he employed interchangeably with 'youth') from urban areas, although some of the young voters came from rural areas. Clearly the population sample on which Evalistus worked was not representative enough, bearing in mind that most of the rural youths are unemployed individuals and school dropouts. Nevertheless, this study adds to the literature that tells us that youths around the globe are becoming less and less active in politics in the current climate.

Declining engagement in politics on the part of young citizens in Africa (Lekalake and Gyimah-Boadi, 2016), particularly in Namibia, is associated with a number of challenges, two important ones being that ageing politicians – the old guard – are clinging to power across the political spectrum and that women lack representation in political leadership positions (Bandora, 2014; Evalistus, 2015). It is believed that the youth feels that politics is for older politicians, who are not inclusive and accommodating when it comes to youth empowerment. Makgala and Botlhomilwe (2017) added that the African youth is generally disillusioned with politics and civic engagement. Validating this idea are the findings of a survey that was conducted by the Electoral Commission of Namibia (ECN) in 2012. This study brought to light the existence of many factors that drive youths' political apathy in Namibia. Such factors include perceptions that political activism and engagement does not yield results, distrust of political parties and institutions, and lack of access to political leadership. Some of the main challenges for youth participation related to these general factors are limited opportunities for the young to participate in decision-making processes, and lack of capacity development, especially for young women. More than half of the respondents (54.6 per cent) thought that the communication tools used by political and civic leaders were not attractive to the youth and almost three quarters of them (74.8 per cent) felt that regional youth activities had to be linked to national initiatives if they were to attract more youths. These are among the key findings of the ECN survey.

A Namibian Afrobarometer survey conducted in 2014, three years before the ECN survey, consolidates the impression that regional councillors do not consistently and actively engage the public on the importance of their works in the region. A significant number of participants indicated that regional councillors do not consult their communities sufficiently. Conversely, 79 per cent of the participants avowed that in the past year they

never contacted their councillors, either to report an important problem or to share views with them. These findings point to a strong disconnection between politicians and the people they serve; and this, in return, explains why community members are disengaged. The situation highlights the need for an empirical research that should help to devise a possible engagement strategy. And, of curse, engaged citizens would be more likely to recognize the importance of subnational government structures such as regional and local authorities (IPPR, 2015b).

Observing this trend of youth apathy with some concern, governments across the world have been trying to find solutions to this issue. Consistent and convergent results, such as the one reported above, can be of service in this respect. In 2009 African governments, through their African Youth Charter at the African Union (AU), formulated an African Youth Decade Plan of Action whereby each signatory promised to increase youth participation in political issues. The decade runs from 2009 to 2018, on the expectation that more youths in Africa will be active in politics and civic activities by the end than were at the beginning. One of the resolutions adopted by this framework is to use new media, including mobile phones, as platforms for attracting young people to politics, especially at regional and local governance levels. Namibia is one the countries that signed and ratified the African Youth Charter with the main aim of increasing youth political participation and civic engagement by 2018. Bearing in mind that the National Youth Act 2009 defines a 'youth' in Namibia as a citizen between the ages of 18 and 35 years, let me recall that this country has a relatively young population, almost 37 per cent of which is under the age of 15, and that the median age is 21 (which means that half of the population is below and the other half is above this age: NSA, 2014). These figures indicate how crucial the new media resolution adopted by the action plan can be for Namibia.

Given the increase in mobile phone and other new media usage, various scholars in political communication revealed that mobile phones can be used as a tool for youth engagement in regional and local politics. The high number of mobile phone subscriptions in the global South (Garcia-Castañon, Rank, & Barreto, 2011) encouraged the hypothesis that youths are more active online than offline, and this in turn fuelled a debate. In the digital era, youths have different ways of making their voices heard by fellow youths elsewhere in the world. Nevertheless, some prefer to remain politically neutral, as they do not understand the importance or necessity of being a member of a political party.

The online presence of youths through their mobile phones can help the countries that signed the African Youth Decade Charter to achieve their goals of increasing youth participation in political issues (Lekalake & Gyimah-Boadi, 2016). Mobile phones and other new media such as social networks are virtual extensions of what used to be physically localized coffeehouses, restaurants, hotels, salons, and town-level meetings, as proposed by subcultures theory (Baker, Robards, & Buttigieg, 2015; Ndlovu & Mbenga, 2013). They serve as electronic town halls for the youth – sites where where nationally and geographically

dispersed young people can meet and discuss matters that concern them. They create a youth subculture sphere, conceived of as a discursive arena where private people come together to discuss matters of mutual interest freely, as a public (Baker et al., 2015).

Addressing the 2012 annual ICT Summit in Windhoek, the former minister of ICT in Namibia informed the participants that, in that year, mobile phone penetration in Namibia passed 110 per cent, with about 2.35 million active customers for both Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM) and code-division multiple access (CDMA) combined. This figure is higher than the Namibian population. According to the minister, more than 80,000 customers accessed the Internet through a personal computer or tablet and more than 470,000 through their mobile phones, with the result that in 2012 almost 550,000 users accessed the mobile Internet from various platforms (Kaapanda, 2012). The figure is expected to be even higher today, if one looks at the rate of acquisition of mobile phones, especially among young people in Namibia.

Despite this interesting growth in new media acquisitions throughout the world, the role of mobile phones in engaging youths in regional and local political processes has not been satisfactorily examined. In Namibia, no single study can be traced that explores how mobile phones are used by young people to participate in regional and local politics. A literature on youth political participation in offline and online public activities is, however, emerging in sub-Saharan Africa. In order to contribute to it, this chapter discusses the empirical case of how youths of the Ohangwena region use their mobile phones to participate in regional and local politics for effective service delivery throughout the country. Particularly, it is believed that young people often use their mobile phones in order to consume political content and to engage with it, and that the platforms these devices offer have the potential to foster political participation and civic engagement at the grassroots level of governance, to reduce the political passivity of citizens, and to nurture an inclusive democracy (Yamamoto et al., 2016; Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014).

5.2   POLITICAL PARTICIPATION LANDSCAPE

Political communication scholars have defined political participation differently for more than two decades, ever since they started deliberating over the concept of youth political participation. The latest definition comes from Resnick and Casale (2014), who understand political participation as applying to citizens' activities that aim to influence the selection of government personnel and its decisions, for example voting in elections, as well as to more informal modalities of engagement, for example meeting community members, contacting political representatives, or getting involved in collective action. This is the definition adopted here, because I think it has the best chances of helping us to understand young Namibians' use of mobile devices in regional and local politics.

Studies revealed that, if political activities are not inclusive and proper channels of communication are not used, the result can be political disengagement. Yamamoto et al. (2016) defined *political disengagement* as a negative attitude towards politics that inhibits political participation or civic engagement, causing political apathy in young people. Thus youth apathy is measured in youths' unwillingness or reluctance to get involved in any kind of political activities, regionally and locally (see also Kruikemeier & Shehata, 2016; Lekalake & Gyimah-Boadi, 2016). Youths with high levels of apathy make very little effort, if any, to engage politically or civically. As already explained, this kind of attitude among the youth can be caused by political cynicism – that is, distrust and lack of confidence in the country's political leaders.

According to Verba and Nie (1972), there are four modes of political participation: *voting* (e.g. being a registered voter and casting a vote); *performing campaign activities* (e.g. working for a political party, or being a party member); *contacting public officials* (e.g. a government official, or elected councillors, traditional leaders, church leaders); and *undertaking cooperative or communal activities* (e.g. participating in a local community meeting, being a member of a youth forum or a youth club, volunteering in community or village projects or programmes aimed at raising the standard of living for residents).

Brady (1999: 737) extends the definition of participation to include, 'actions by ordinary citizens directed toward influencing some political outcomes'. Such actions incorporate drama, songs, and the use of mobile phones, social media, and music into political processes, with the main aim of influencing, attracting, and conveying political messages to the masses. Brady's definition opened the door to *inclusive democracy*. Inclusive politics is a relatively new concept in political science, media studies, and journalism. It involves radical, feminist, and liberation movements in the global South that assume that, at the beginning of the new millennium, the world faced a multidimensional crisis – economic, ecological, social, cultural, and political), which was – and is – caused by the concentration of power in the hands of a few elites (Pernice, 2016). To a certain extent, an inclusive democracy requires equal distribution of power among citizens at all levels, including at the grassroots level of governance represented by regional and local authorities in democratic governments; and this in turn leads to direct democracy (Fotopoulos, 1997). Direct democracy means listening to the masses and involving them in decision-making by letting them free to voice their opinion, criticize social and political processes, and suggest strategies they think can improve their standard of living (Schugurensky, 2016). Political participation can also be measured in terms of whether or not citizens of a public sphere (normally within a nation-state) are active members of political parties and trade unions, engage in various civic duties, and register to vote – as well as vote (Lall, 2014).

On the African continent, political participation has been regarded as consisting mainly of citizens' presence or active attendance at political rallies, meetings, conferences, and other

gatherings of this sort. This kind of presence has been declining, as citizens – particularly young citizens – increasingly choose not to attend such meetings in person, since they can participate in them *digitally* (Kruikemeier & Shehata, 2016; Towner & Muñoz, 2016). Empirical studies that investigate this phenomenon offer an explanation for it (Mattes & Richardson, 2015; Dawson, 2014; Fu et al., 2016; Hao et al., 2014). According to these studies, many young people nowadays feel that attending political gatherings is a waste of time; they would rather stay at home and do some constructive work.

The present chapter aims at contributing to this debate by suggesting some strategies by which political parties, political leaders, government officials, and youth representatives to change their way of engaging young people in the democratic political processes even in the public debates. I should start by saying that, in this dissertation as a whole, 'political participation' refers to any act or activity carried out by a citizen with a view to influencing, or having an effect on, public decisions about the social, economic, technological, and political welfare of that community. According to this definition, taking part in election campaigns and voting, attending community and town-hall meetings, or being a member of a regional youth forum or youth group that advocates the empowerment of young people are all expressions of political participation.

Mchakulu (2007: 96) made the following statement:

> Youth do not see politics as a solution to their problems, but rather as a source of community and economic disruption. Thus, it makes sense that many youth avoid political debate and deliberation, or indeed any discussion of political empowerment for youth, and instead focus on socio-economic development issues.

Yet some research (e.g. Lekalake & Gyimah-Boadi, 2016) reveals, importantly, that many youths are not quite as politically passive or disengaged as it is claimed, insofar as they remain critically engaged in projects that improve their own lives and the lives of those around them. Everyday politics and the personal struggle of young people to try to make the best of their lives is entangled in a larger social and political fight. These people, who felt disillusioned and alienated from conventional spaces of participation and local politics more broadly, acquired a sense of agency and political consciousness through protests (Dawson, 2014); and there is great potential there. This is where the political use of mobile telephony comes into its own, especially on the matter of political mobilization in places such as rural Namibia. As stated before, no study has so far been found that explores this problematic.

5.3 YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN NAMIBIA

The latest regional and local authority elections in Namibia took place on 27 November 2015. The Electoral Commission of Namibia (ECN), which is mandated to strengthen constitutional democracy and to promote democratic electoral processes, used various platforms to sensitize citizens about elections and other democratic matters prior to the election date. It used radio, television, newspapers, the short message service (SMS) on mobile devices, and social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to attract as many youths as possible to electoral politics (ECN, 2015). All these steps were taken in order to ensure that more Namibians – especially the country's youth, which is believed to be apathetic and uninterested in regional and local politics – register for the elections. Additionally, to secure youth participation in the electoral process, the ECN recruited 112 youth ambassadors, all between the ages of 18 and 24 years. They were contracted for a period of three months, from 15 September to 15 December 2015. Eight youth ambassadors, including youths with disabilities, were recruited in each of the 14 regions. These ambassadors assisted voter education officers in different regions with the provision of voter and civic education, motivated other young persons and people with disabilities in the regions to participate in the planned elections, and served to supplement the staff in these regions, in preparation for the 2015 elections (ECN, 2015). As a result of this strategy, 1,267,335 voters were registered for the 2015 regional council elections and 418,544 voters were registered for the 2015 local authority elections (ECN, 2015). In the second case, 44 per cent of the voters consisted of youths. This was the largest number on record for young people registered for elections after independence in 1990 (ECN, 2015).

Surprisingly, though, the voter turnout was relatively low for both the regional council and the local authority elections – namely 39.8 per cent for the former and 36.6 per cent for the latter (ECN, 2015). The reason why the turnout was so low when a high number of people registered for elections is not known.

Low voter turnout for regional council and local authority elections has been a concern in Namibia. In fact, only the first round of these elections, of 1992 recorded high voter turnouts, of 82 per cent and 81 per cent respectively; all subsequent elections at these levels have seen very low voter turnouts (ECN, 2015). For example, the voter turnout for local authority and regional council elections in 2010 was 33 per cent and 38 per cent respectively. So the 2015 elections were no exception in this regard. And, along with voter turnout for these elections, the overall participation of young Namibians in straightforwardly political activities has been generally low (Motsamai, 2015), in spite of their more diffuse participation in politics through engagement in life-improving projects, as discussed at the end of the previous section.

What is more, the 2015 post-election report of the Namibian Institute for Democracy (NID) compounded the growing concern about young people's lack of engagement in regional and local politics by signalling a similar attitude of apathy to national elections. Voter apathy in the 2015 presidential and National Assembly elections was higher than in 2014, although even then the majority of voters were elderly people and youths registered a low turnout (Motsamai, 2015).

Now, regional and local authorities are important elements in Namibia's governance system, as they are tasked with bringing government services closer to the people in terms of delivery and development at the grassroots level (IPPR, 2015b). These bodies are regulated respectively by the Regional Councils Act no. 22 of 1992 and by the Local Authority Councils Act no. 23 of 1992. Regional councillors are elected by the masses and are expected to engage citizens in local decision-making processes. They must facilitate and maximize these citizens' participation in the affairs of their communities; in other words, they must act to promote democratic inclusiveness and bring the government closer to the people. It is at this level of governance structure that the leadership, both political and civic, is expected to stimulate broad public participation in the development of democracy and the deepening of its processes (IPPR, 2015b). This is why decline of interest in this particular area of political life is of great concern, especially when it comes from the country's youth.

In this chapter I will propose a solution to the problem of low participation of young people in regional-level politics, in Namibia and elsewhere in the world. The solution I wish to suggest capitalizes on two main factors: the increasing number of subscriptions for mobile phones across the country; and the potential of digital political platforms to facilitate and stimulate even offline political engagements.

5.4   FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents findings from my ethnographic fieldwork in the Ohangwena region. The research question that led this exploratory part of my study was this: How do young people in the Ohangwena Regional Youth Forum (ORYF) participate in civic and political activities by using their mobile phones?

My fieldwork took me into four key areas, on which I will consequently focus in this chapter. These areas correspond to the following questions:

1. Who are the young and what motivates them to take part in regional and local politics?
2. What civic and political activities do they get involved in by using their mobile phones? Are these strictly online activities, or are offline, real-life activities triggered through the mobile phone as well?
3. How do young people communicate with their fellows, both in and outside the region, to share political messages and information?

4. What are the constraints or challenges that affect what I would call the 'mobile' participation of youngsters in politics and their 'mobile' civic engagement in public affairs?

The findings are presented according to the themes that emerged during the data analysis, which are encapsulated in the subheadings of this section.

5.4.1 Political Platforms for Youth Employment, Political Dialogue, and Survival Politics

This part of the study explored the reasons why the young people in my survey joined regional or constituency youth forums. Many of them had been unemployed for a long time; quite a few others were self-employed. Most of these young citizens were aged between 18 and 35 years, male, and driven by the common goal of bringing development into their constituencies. The majority had mobile phones, but a few of them did not. The latter said that they always received information from their friends, when they meet. Overall, my results indicated that most of the forum members were literate (they could read and write) and came from families of working people. Only one member in this forum was unable to speak or understand English.

Lameck, an unemployed 26-year-old, stated his reasons for joining the forum thus:

> What motivated me is that I spent too much time at home and I have been seeing my fellow youths going to several places and participating in different activities, so I realized that this was a good thing compared to just being home doing nothing, so let me join so that I can be like my fellow youths participating in different activities.

Gadana, a self-employed 26-year-old, said:

> I decided to join the youth forum so that I can negotiate and talk about how to bring development in our constituency. Second thing I noticed in our constituency is that we have a high rate of unemployment in our community and more youth employment opportunities need to be created.

This tells us, interestingly, that forums are or can be used by members as a networking platform for youth employment in the region.

Kamilo, an 18-year-old, gave the following account of his reasons for joining a youth forum:

> I have joined because I want to socialize with my fellow youth, to share ideas. I am unemployed and have no other source of income … here I mean to put ideas together with my fellow youths and discuss young people['s] related matters … [I] like to talk about the right things that can help young people.

The quotations above reveal that a need for networking and local political change rather than national political dialogue was the decisive motivational factor for most of the young people: they joined forums in their constituencies in order to discuss matters that affect their lives. These young people also debated over developmental issues such as youth projects in the region, to see whether there will be change and socioeconomic development growth. These findings are consistent with those of Kahne, Lee, and Feezell (2013), Kahne et al. (2014), and Roberts (2015), who discovered that young people's engagement in some form of non-political activity can serve as a gateway to participation in civic and political life such as volunteering, community problem solving, protesting, and having a political voice. My findings can also be seen as continuing the debate that emerges from Gökçe-Kızılkaya and Onursal-Beşgül (2017), who claimed that youth forums in Turkey (called there youth assemblies) are an important venue for the youth to make their voices heard. My study extends this conclusion in the areas of young people's employment, survival, and political networking.

5.4.2   Online and Offline Politics

In the forums, young people come up with their timetable for weekly meetings, choose their chairperson and other officials, as prescribed in the National Youth Act 3 of 2009, and make sure that the forum is registered with the relevant authorities in the region. In these meetings young people discuss issues that affect them, and they do so by exchanging ideas on how to go about resolving them or by alerting the relevant office about their issue. I spoke to Simon, an employed 24-year-old, who gave me this picture:

> When we [youths] meet, we come up with different ideas of role play, topics for dramas, and ways of motivating each other so that our group will continue to move forward, we encourage other youths to join [us,] and we go to schools showing them what we have prepared in our club.

According to Simon, people in his group learnt a lot of things during their discussions.

> These young people usually discuss matters of direct relevance and concern to them, such as HIV/AIDS, teenage pregnancies, alcohol and drugs abuse, unemployment, and project proposal-writing skills. Sometimes they also share ideas on how to complete application forms for employment and such like.

Edie, a 23-year-old, stated:

> Sometimes we discuss and educate ourselves on how to prevent ourselves from contracting HIV/AIDS and to also respect our culture. We also discuss issues concerning politics.

One important point needs to be mentioned here: most of the young people felt that it would be better if all members in the region were to have mobile phones, so as to be able to

discuss some private and very confidential issues (e.g. HIV status, pregnancies, sex) online, because obviously not all youths are always free to talk about such matters openly during meetings. They thought that online discussions are friendlier and more private and that, in consequence, youths can discuss all the delicate aspects of their problems there. This is an important finding for my dissertation insofar as it enables me to argue that the culture of the youth forum space fosters new forms of interaction and openness. In this respect youth forums are unlike the more traditional political spaces, for example meetings, which discourage more intimate exchanges – because entrenched cultural enactments of what these spaces are for have marked them and the kinds of practices that can emerge from them (Arora, 2012).

My research shows that the members of the ORYF form a diverse group of individuals. This element of diversity doesn't quite fit with Gökçe-Kızılkaya and Onursal-Beşgül's (2017) conclusion that only a small number of youths use unconventional method of political participation such as youth forums or assemblies, which seems to suggest a restricted and somewhat uniform (or at least less diverse) composition. At any rate, it emerged clearly from my study that the number of youths who take part in non-political activities such as youth forums, both online and offline, is rather large.

5.4.3   Perspectives on Political Participation in the Public Sphere

While doing fieldwork in the region, I also explored young citizens' understanding of the concept of political participation. Most participants were asked to define or describe political participation in their own words and supplied unique answers. For instance, Ndapu, an unemployed 20-year-old, ventured this description: 'it is the ability to influence or convince others to accept or reject a certain policy or political ideology, for example'. Anna, an employed 26-year-old, offered an analogy: she said that, to her, political participation is 'like when I am influenced by my friend who likes dancing and now I follow him too so that we can all be dancing'.

Anna's analogy suggests that participation in politics takes different forms. One may never know that what he or she is involved in is politics (Abdalla, 2016). Interestingly, Lahya, a 29-year-old, also employed, has a different idea of political participation. To her, this phrase captures situations such as 'when taking part in elections to vote for the people who are going to represent us in a certain team or party'.

All these attempts reveal that, to the youth, political participation has to do with influencing others, with taking part in elections, and with performing activities in and for the community.

A few young people did not bother to attempt to explain their understanding of the term at all, claiming that they were not interested in politics and would not know what political participation is. They said they believed that those interested in politics could define it better, so they would leave the task to them.

5.4.4   Political Ideologies, Family Politics, and Constitutional Obligations

During observations of youth meetings and semi-structured interviews with members of ORYF, I found out that most youngsters in this group belonged to the South West People's Organization (SWAPO), which is the current ruling party in Namibia; the current president is a member of this party. There were, however, young people who had enrolled in other political parties in the region, such as the Democratic Turnhale Alliance (DTA), the Rally for Democracy and Progress (RDP), and the Congress of Democrats (COD).

Some of these youths came to the meetings wearing their party mascots and insignia. I asked them why they did this, and they responded that the dress code 'is a symbol' of their 'political affiliation' and they 'cannot hide it'. A few told me that they joined this or that political party because they were in agreement with its ideology and political line and would like to make a difference in the lives of their fellow young citizens in the region. For example this participant, when asked why she joined a political party, said:

> I belong to [name withheld] simply because it's where most of the youth are … most of the youth are on the side of [name withheld] because we are trying to fight against poverty, ok, I do not want to talk about other political parties, I just want to say, I think they are not, they are not fighting against that. (Ndeshi, 25, unemployed)

But I received a different angle from the forum's vice chair, who stated her reasons for belonging to a political party as follows:

> I joined a political party because we have been told that when you turn 18 years you need to vote and to vote you need to be a member of a political party. I made a choice of joining a political party that brings development in my region or country. (Caro, 24, employed)

A number of participants said that they were not members of any political party, either because they were not interested in politics or because they were not impressed with the existing political parties and their manifestos. Still others clearly indicated that they were not aware of the benefits of belonging to a political party.

Among existing members of political parties, it turned out that some youths had joined simply because their parents were members of the same organization. However, these were only a few and indicated that they tended not to attend party meetings or rallies, which they did not consider to be 'beneficial' to them (on this attitude, see also Resnick & Casale, 2014).

Finally, I had occasion to register a certain degree of confusion and ignorance across the whole spectrum. A few young people were registered as members of political parties but did not really know why they had joined them. On the other hand, other youths were not registered at all because they did not know what procedure to follow in order to join and become a party member.

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5.4.5   Communication and Mobile Connectivity

Mobile phone subscriptions in the Ohangwena region have been increasing recently. In 2011, out of 43,723 households in the region, 23,247 – 53.1 per cent – owned a mobile device; this is a good indicator of acquisition. Some constituencies, for example Omundaungilo, rated low on the criterion of mobile phone ownership per household: only 370 out of 1,169 – 32 per cent – households reported owning a mobile phone in 2011 (NSA, 2014). But the majority of young people in semi-urban areas such as Eenhana, Ohangwena, Oshikango, Ohaukelo, and Eembaxu are reported to own mobile phones; and they use them mainly to communicate with their fellows. In Eenhana, the capital of the region, every other young person I saw had a mobile phone and one in three youths was engaged in conversation on the mobile phone or busy with it in some other way. It was interesting to observe that those who were talking into their mobiles were either speaking loud or using a lot of body language, especially by raising their arms.

Participants in my study were asked how they communicate with fellow forum members in the region, particularly those who are not on the executive team. Most of them answered that for the most part they make use of mobile phones (see also Aricat, 2015): they call, they text through the SMS, or they use social media (since most political parties have Facebook pages). However, I also noted that in most cases such communications are not about party politics but mainly friendship talk, sharing of information about study opportunities and vacancies, and requests of advice from peers on how to overcome challenges such as loneliness and stress (see also Yamamoto et al., 2016).

Additionally, 50 per cent of the interviewed young citizens acknowledged that they have local WhatsApp groups for their parties: for example, in the Ohangwena region there is an Ohangwena SWAPO Party WhatsApp group. That's the main place where they discuss political issues that affect their daily lives as citizens and residents of the region.

All this casts doubts on the validity of some of the conclusions reached by scholars such as de Vreese and Elenbaas (2008), who stated that new media have a negative impact on the political participation of a country's youth, as they can be used to instill distrust or cynicism in an audience (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2010; Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010), thus alienating its members from political or civic activities. Only a few among my participants communicate with their fellow party members on social media as a matter of course. Their communication tends to be hampered by the digital divide, as not all the young people in rural areas have Internet connectivity or access to the Internet; but they still believe that the mobile phone helps them to communicate with their peers. A thorough analysis of social media pages and groups will be done in chapter 7, which looks specifically at the discourses, relationships, and debates that are formed or take place on those platforms.

When I spoke to Caro about how ORYF members use mobile phones to communicate with their peers, she said: 'we communicate with them usually through their cell phones by calling, sending SMS, and most of the time at conferences'. Caro's statement supports what

Herman Wasserman (2011) found in one of the studies he conducted in Africa: Africans use mobile phones in their everyday life to take photographs, make films, search the Internet, and, increasingly, for social networking. Other studies (e.g. Berger, 2011; Essoungou, 2010; Etzo & Collender, 2010) were able to expand the list. Africans also use their mobile phones to transfer money, check market prices for products on sales and in auctions, monitor and observe elections, and send and receive public health or emergency messages.

I observed that some of the young citizens who have mobile phones inform others, who do not, of any news they receive through their mobiles. This created a culture of sharing in the village. Paulus, a 27-year-old, remarked:

> Because as a team, if you know that someone plays soccer but you cannot tell them through the phone because maybe the person cannot read, we tell them face to face by walking long distances to their houses and others that can read we text them to meet at the field, and sometimes youth likes bars, we pick them up or sometimes we whistle because the field is near and they come.

This is another way of sharing news or information in the absence of relevant media such as newspapers, television, and so on; and it takes into account that most of the young people can always be found at cuca shops.[5] Their fellows have to reach them in this way, so that everyone receives the latest information. As for those who cannot read and write, their friends visit them in person, at home, to deliver the message or to read it out for them; and sometimes they spend up to five hours only to reach a friend's house.

Tuhafeni, a 25-year-old, gives a good picture of the challenges of spreading the news in time:

> Most of the times we use cell phones as our chairperson has all members' cell phone numbers by short messages or [we] send the message to the counsellor and announce it through the radio but sometimes we fail as this information does not reach us on time and we are far from each other.

This picture is supported by Gabs, an unemployed 24-year-old:

> In most cases, we communicate through mobile phones by sending short messages because at some places we do not have network. Our colleagues normally send short messages but we receive them late, although this is the only way we can communicate and deliver information to one another, there is no other way because we are not living in the same place.

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5   Cuca shops are privately owned small business entities in rural areas that sell mostly basic necessities along with traditional alcoholic beverages such as Otombo, ginger, and Okatokele. Most of these shops do not have operating hours, as they are less regulated.

It is very clear that, owing to the considerable distance between their houses or from a house to a meeting point, young people choose to communicate through their mobile phones: this is their best and most efficient option. When it comes to affordability, sending messages to others seems the best option too: MTC, which is the largest mobile telecommunication operator in Namibia, has special promotion packages of recharge vouchers with pre-loaded free data bundles for Internet, WhatsApp, the short message service (SMS), and Facebook. These bundles come with the recharge voucher that a customer buys. Such packages work especially well for those who have good mobile network or Internet connectivity.

5.4.6   Politics and Digital Divide

Most of the villages in my study have limited power or electricity. Although most of the young people in these villages do have mobile phones, they can be left with them uncharged for up to three days in a row, if they do not find someone to take them to a place where there is power or to bring their phones back once they have been charged. The situation is a little different for young people who live in remote villages, far away from towns. In those villages there are houses with solar panels; however, villagers have to pay at least N$5.00 to charge their phones, as requested by panel owners. The owners' justification for asking villagers to pay is that, if panels get damaged or need to be repaired, they need to be able to pay – and the charging fee would cover just such costs. However, it was revealed that solar panels generate income for their owners' families and that phone charging has turned into a kind of rural entrepreneurship. The situation makes it difficult for the elderly and the young unemployed to charge their phones daily, since they have no adequate funds for it. As Wasserman (2011: 149) stated in one of the studies, '[f]or many Africans, the handsets (mobile phones) are too expensive and running costs are too high to permit full use of the capabilities offered by mobile technologies'.

     In some villages of the region, network connectivity tends to be good around midnight. The young people with whom I spoke told me that midnight is the only time when they can access the Internet or make phone calls. I asked Ileka, a 25-year-old rural resident, to explain to me the reason for this and I received the following comment:

> During the day, the network is very weak … so you will find some people waiting until midnight to go and look for a specific point where they normally access the network. But this is better than during that time when there were no mobile phones in the village, says Ileka.

At my prompting, another rural resident, 24-year-old Matias, talked to me about the challenges that youths in rural areas experience when using their mobile phones for political participation. Matias observed that '[s]hops are very far … some of the youths in the village never even used a phone before … we are really in need of shops and network connectivity in this village'.

Supporting this is 20-year-old Krista, who expanded:

> Even if you have a mobile phone you can stay even for a week or two without using it as there is no network coverage … we sometimes get the network at one spot in the neighbor's field but that one you have to go there around 12 o'clock midnight … it is very risky as we have wild animals too here.

The excerpts above are generally consistent with the results of a study that was conducted in remote rural locations in Ghana and Malawi. The study describes how the few people who possessed mobile phones in those areas were often seen to be walking to particular points where signal can be obtained – most commonly a hilltop (Porter, Hampshire, Abane, Munthali, Robson, Mashiri, & Tanle, 2012). According to the authors, no shops in the researched areas sold credit or mobile phones. The situation I found in Ohangwena presents some striking similarities in that young people in rural areas of this region seem to have problems of network connectivity, which are compounded by the fact that shops are quite remote from the villages. But there is a difference: in Ohangwena mobile phone ownership is high – 43.5 per cent, as reported earlier, in chapter 4 (see p. 65) – which, taken together with Matias' and Krista's statements, indicates that owning a mobile phone is not really a problem in the region, as it is in Ghana and Malawi. The real problems here are network coverage and power supply, on account of which even those who possess mobiles are unable to use them daily – unlike their peers in urban areas. But the words of Matias and Krista also suggest a real appreciation for mobile telephony: it is clear that, for all the difficulties of communicating, young rural people compare favourably the current period, when this possibility exists, with the earlier days when there were no mobile devices in their villages.

A final point relates the digital divide to something I noted in the previous section. As we have seen there, young people with mobile phones in the villages act as what may be called *village messengers*; in this respect, as political intermediaries, one may consider them an extension of Internet intermediaries, that is, facilitators who bring third parties to the Internet, mediate online communication and enable various forms of online expression (see MacKinnon, Hickok, Bar, & Hai-in 2015). This kind of function is shared by Google's search engine, Twitter's social network, and Vodafone's telecommunication and Internet services. There is now a literature on political intermediaries that shows how today's intermediaries are increasingly focusing on the machine and not on the human. This line of research emphasizes the role of technology in facilitating various kinds of political contact and engagement: in a nutshell, technology supports human agency.

But in the specific context of rural Ohangwena, which is determined by the digital divide, human agency plays a rather heavy part, which is crucial to this 'intermediation'. People with messages ask for the number of a nearby youth who has a mobile phone; then they send him or her a message that has to be passed on to the right recipients. According to

the respondents interviewed by me, this procedure really helps people to send and receive messages within and outside their village, although it is time-consuming, as messengers have to walk long distances to the recipients' houses.

5.4.7   Young People's Political Apathy and Cynicism: Towards an Emerging Mobile Society

While in the region, I attended some community meetings and informal gatherings along with the youth forum meetings, with the main aim of observing the use of mobile phones on those occasions. Additionally, I also wanted to see how many young people attended them. I noticed that, as a rule, only a few young people would turn up for public meetings, no matter whether the latter were called up by political leaders or by traditional leaders such as village headmen or committee chairs. At one meeting that was addressed by a constituency councillor only a handful of young citizens turned up. Some of them stood and listened for few minutes, then left. The meeting was attended instead by elderly people and children, who discussed issues facing their community such as corruption, water shortage, lack of electricity, poor network connectivity, lack or gravel roads, and alcohol and drug abuse among young people, especially school-age children.

To complete the picture, the semi-structured interviews I carried out revealed that young people were no longer interested in physical, face-to-face community meetings conducted by the councillors; and the distance that separated their homes from to the meeting points added to this general lack of interest. Nevertheless, they made efforts to attend their youth forum meetings. Many young people have their reasons as to why they do not attend those meetings. Caro told me this:

> I think the reason for the youths' low attendance at those meetings called for by the headmen or by the councillors is that most of the youths in the villages do not get assistance from our elders [= politicians] and neither do they discuss youth-related matters such as unemployment and study opportunities. You always find these elders talking about housing but we do not have houses.

This is interesting to compare with the following conclusion of a study conducted by Lekalake and Gyimah-Boadi for the network Afrobarometer:

> Less than half (47 per cent) of the 18- to 35-year-olds who participated … say they attended a community meeting at least once during the previous year, while 40 per cent joined others to raise an issue (vs 57 per cent and 47 per cent for older citizens). Young women's participation lags behind that of their male peers (by 9 percentage points, on average). (Lekalake & Gyimah-Boadi, 2016)

Some young people also consider that public meetings summoned by councillors are for politicians only and, even more specifically, for ruling party members. Since most of the

councillors are members of the SWAPO, which is the ruling party, youths who are neither members nor supporters of the SWAPO simply do not attend such meetings, which they think are not designed for them.

During a youth meeting that was held at the Oshikango constituency office in Ohangwena in August 2016, a youth officer from the Ministry of Youth raised her concern about the manner in which youths were taking part in civic and political gatherings. She asserted that some of them lacked the interest to attend local meetings or to participate in community discussions. As this youth officer presented the situation, only a few youths usually attend such meetings, and yet this is where their problems are supposed to be discussed and where actions could be taken to address them. She also made the point that in some constituencies there were WhatsApp groups, but that some youths developed an attitude of reading the notifications on WhatsApp without really, actively participating in the discussion – part of the phenomenon now known as clicktivism or slacktivism. At this meeting, youths claimed in response that they did not get the messages as they were announced on the radio; moreover, they said they hardly listen to the radio. They blamed the councillor for not using the right sorts of platforms, such as their mobile phones or their WhatsApp group, where the young people are, in order to reach them and deliver messages about meetings. They wanted the councillor to use all the available platforms on which the youth can be reached, so that no one would feel left out.

Most of the young people to whom I spoke at various meetings or during interviews revealed that they and their peers would not show up at events or meetings where they do not get anything to eat, or where they have to pay for anything instead of receiving money themselves. They wanted to be rewarded for attending a meeting. My participants further claimed that there is a lack of morale among the young citizens in terms of their involvement in public debates or political issues. One young citizen commented on this and advised others to attend community meetings so that they may learn, gain and get more information. He also criticized young people's habit of wasting time in bars and not gaining anything, when what they needed was to join youth groups and educate themselves. Another young citizen, a youthful forum member, mentioned the topic of youth volunteerism in relation to public debates and discussions and stated that some young people lacked that courage to be volunteers. She put great emphasis on youth disengagement from public issues and debates, which is a matter of concern and contributes to explaining why young people will not get the right information at the right time.

These findings challenge those of a survey conducted for Afrobarometer (see Lekalake & Gyimah-Boadi 2016), which concluded that attendance at political campaign rallies is the most popular form of pre-electoral engagement among young Africans. Interestingly, the Afrobarometer survey also stated that 33 per cent of the country's youth – in other words, about one third – attended at least one such rally in 2015, by comparison to 37 per cent of the older citizens. My findings raise a question mark about this result as well. (The gender

gap in participation in rallies averages 10 percentage points.)

I asked forum members which group usually predominates in the meetings held in their communities. Was it political representatives or traditional leaders? They confirmed that it is mostly older adults who attend the meetings, while young adults are very few; in consequence, rallies and other gatherings tend to be organized by political party representatives. Some of the young citizens were of the view that the mobile phone can offer a solution out of the impasse of youth participation. Hence they were in the process of appealing to their political and civic leaders, asking them to consider diverging to these platforms so that more young people can be engaged in regional and local political discussions; this would create *digital inclusivity*. They proposed that these leaders have mobile numbers for all young people in their constituencies and always send them messages or invite them to meetings by phone. According to 34-year-old Jack,

> Mobile phones can engage the youth to get off the streets and be able to join these meetings. There are some people [youth] who spend most of their time at home and they are mostly on their phones … Most information is obtained through the phone. Therefore if they use mobile phones it will be a good way to inform the youth and get most of them to attend meetings digitally.

Forum members also suggested that choosing leaders from the youth would have a very healthy effect overall. They pointed out that there were very few young people in leadership positions in the region, and this had a discouraging effect, especially since the young did not have role models to follow at those meetings, where they needed them most.

5.4.8   Religion as an Offline Political Outreach

Since I spent most of the time in the region throughout my research, I listened to the radio every day when councillors were making announcements, sharing information, or discussing local matters. This gave me practical examples of how councillors and other leaders in Ohangwena used the radio to convey messages from different offices, give feedback on complaints raised by residents, and inform them about job opportunities or application forms for employment, about scholarships, or about the availability of other services at their offices. However, my observation notes reveal that only a few of the young people used the radio to transmit information or messages to their leaders. It was mainly (if not only) the councillors who kept informing their communities through this channel; there was no two-way traffic, and this made the radio less engaging than it should have been.

I also attended some Sunday church services where, after the main service, councillors used the opportunity to address the citizens already gathered there and talked to them about issues that affected their region. This puts the church in Ohangwena right at the hart of the debate around John Rawls' theory of liberal democracy and liberal citizenship. This theory regards the act of informing individuals as vital protection and as guarantee of a fair

political process. In consequence, according to Rawls, in such a regime leaders can make use of religious events to convey political messages that are for the common good, but are not about party politics (Greenawalt, 1990). One issue broached at an after-service church gathering of this kind was the distribution of drought relief food (DRF)[6] by the government, which one councillor attempted to explain to the public. As the result to the severe drought in the region, this relief distribution programme was changed so that not everyone was supposed to receive the free food, because the existing amount of it would not have been enough. Councillors and committee members had a tough time explaining the rationale behind restrictions in the distribution of relief food and convincing the residents of their justice. Their main argument was that Ohangwena is one of the regions that usually receive a good rainfall and in most cases residents survive on their mahangu (pearl millet) and other traditional food they harvest in their fields.

5.5 CONCLUSION

Let me summarize the findings discussed in this chapter. Many of the young people who are members of ORYF are unemployed and in their early twenties. They are trying to improve their grade 10 or 12 at a nearby tuition centre and have less education than their peers, as most of them did not go to university. On the whole, these people tend to stay at home or hang around bars and cuca shops; and, when connectivity is reliable (if it ever is) and there is network coverage, they actively discuss issues of public concern with their fellows, digitally. However, the dominant group of youths who take part in such discussions consists of employed people and of urban residents.

The chapter further concluded that youth forums are used as a good network for employment and source of political identity. Their members derive from them a sense of purpose (instead of killing time, for example), since they use them to discuss issues of political survival. They function as political dialoguing platforms where young people can practice re-energizing exercises in order to become more active in their regional developmental approach. The sociopolitical issues that young people discuss in these forums are mainly teenage pregnancies, alcohol and drug abuse, and HIV/AIDs. Members also give encouragement to their disengaged peers, to boost their morale; and they offer tips on project proposal writing. These issues emerged as a result of high prevalence in the region; young people felt that most of them were falling victim and hence needed to create awareness and sensitization about these problems, in order to protect themselves and their families against them.

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6   This is a government programme of distributing food to residents who have been hit hard by the drought. Food is free, in order to ensure that no one will die of hunger.

A third important conclusion is that young people have indeed developed a negative attitude of *political cynicism and apathy* towards attending physical, offline meetings in the region, but this happened only because they felt (and continue to feel) that they are neglected rather than valued (Evalistus, 2015). My fieldwork confirms Mattes and Richardson's (2015) claim that many youths nowadays do not attend meetings offline, in the physical world. According to Kirigha, Mukhongo, and Masinde (2016), too, young people's presence at these meetings has been declining; these citizens in particular choose not to attend in person since they can participate *digitally* instead.

Young people in these communities face many challenges and are under severe constraints, which also play a part in restricting their civic and political contributions and degree of engagement and participation. I list some of these challenges and constraints here (and see also Chatora, 2012):

- the unemployment rate among the Namibian young citizens aged 15–35 is very high;
- there is a good deal of favouritism when opportunities for employing young people in the region open up;
- poor network coverage, cultural hierarchies and protocols at community meetings create barriers and handicaps;
- access to proper road infrastructures and other road networks is poor too;
- young people have a weak representation at decision-making level;
- when it comes to new media and their effects on the country's social development, public and political literacy is low in Ohangwena, among both young citizens and senior leaders;
- the digital divide between semi-urban and rural young people is widening, and the situation is not helped by the lack of mechanisms from political leaders to support all youths, regardless of their political affiliation.

Young Namibians are often portrayed as apathetic or inactive and uninterested in politics in the real world, offline; but, if we consider all the elements of the situation, such descriptions can be misleading, or at any rate do not represent the entire truth. These youths need only a platform that is free from interference from other political agents. My findings demonstrate that, together, regional and constituency youth forums have created an emerging public sphere for the local community and that there is here a space for youths and other disadvantaged groups to discuss solutions to local socioeconomic problems. On this basis, the chapter suggests that a new relationship between political participation, civic engagement, and new media use should be theorized.

Loader, Vromen, and Xenos (2014) defined engagement as conventional forms of political participation and political knowledge among citizens in any country. Wasserman and Garman's (2014) findings from their research in South Africa reveal that young South

Africans who were interviewed as part of the study are disengaged from politics and find that the media do not speak to, or connect with, their everyday lives. On the basis of my results, this conclusion applies to Namibia as well, at least at the present stage. Hence a recommendation was made by the young participants in my study that more active youths be appointed to executive positions in the region, so as to attract fellow youths to these gatherings.

Another major conclusion from this chapter is that, to the young people of Ohangwena, 'politics' does not necessarily have to do with party politics but is mainly tied to *survival*, *employment*, *identity*, *and youth empowerment*, as these youths are the future leaders of the country. However, they also take participating in electoral processes such as elections and being a member of a political party as constitutional obligations that permit them to elect their leaders of choice and to belong to the political party whose ideologies match their own aspirations and understanding of social development.

This allows me to get back and restate a previous conclusion from an enriched perspective. The chapter's balanced view is that, deep down, these young people are not really apathetic about politics; they are politically engaged – but in a different manner from the one familiar to us from the past. As daily users of the Internet, they may prefer to show their interest by committing to online political groups, where they can harness the Internet's resources to their advantage (Hao et al., 2014). Young people are now using these political groups as a means of doing politics among themselves and of discussing matters of public interests. They meet to share, educate themselves, and entertain one another on specific matters.

Additionally, one can conclude from this entire part of my study that young people were using mobile phones mainly to make direct calls, to send messages to their relatives, friends, and fellow youths, and generally to share and convey important information. They were taking advantage of preloaded data bundles that come with various recharge vouchers – bundles that usually include free SMS, free WhatsApp, and free Facebook. Such packages enabled them to create a digital public and platforms where they can discuss youth-related issues all by themselves, without the presence of the elderly or politicians. New media, including mobile phones, are regarded as tools that can be employed by citizens to engage in discussions that touch on matters of national concern – such as land distribution, corruption, political ideologies, and other social issues – within a newly defined sphere known as 'the virtual sphere' (Habermas, 1989; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Papacharissi, 2010; Mudhai, 2013). These online discussions should be encouraged and emphasized by national leaders at all times, and especially when the aim is to encourage young people to participate actively in democratic processes such as elections and community development initiatives.

Young people's direct participation to civic and political life with the help of mobile phones creates the premise for an inclusive and direct digital democracy, wherein each and

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every person feels part of a larger group and contributes to solutions to the common plight. The mobile phone also gives access to social media platforms that can further strengthened this component of democratic participation to the public sphere.

The spread of the Internet in conjunction with mobile telephony has led to the emergence of a new form of citizen participation in many sub-Saharan African countries. While this movement and its impact are less obvious in Africa than in Europe and the United States, vibrant online communities exist in many countries, and citizen journalists are increasingly using digital technologies such as blogs, SMS, social networks, microblogs, video-sharing platforms, and mapping to report and comment on a wide range of topics (Mutsvairo & Columbus, 2012). Associated as they are with this reshaping of the public sphere, mobile phones are hailed as symbols of a revival of bottom-up, participatory democracy in the West; and we would like to see this happening in the global South as well.

There are, however, some caveats. For one thing, it seems that young Namibians have less trust in online posts on social media than do their western counterparts. This is the reason why they tend to prefer using their mobiles for discussions more than as points of entry on social media sites, although the situation is very nuanced, changeable, and hard to appreciate on this front. In fact SMS and direct calling turn out to be the communicating modalities that young people in my study prefer or make most use of. But we must not forget that only a few indicated that they use them for political engagement. There is still a lot of work to be done to put the mobile phone on the map, making it into an instrument of participatory democracy.

Although the Namibian government passed an information and communication technology (ICT) bill to regulate social media communications and made it clear that Internet communication is subject to the same laws that govern offline politics, it has kept its promise of not blocking online political communication. Therefore young people are still able to deliberate freely, online, on national issues. The study on which this chapter is based has inevitable limitations, since it meant to examine only the young people of Ohangwena; to get a more comprehensive picture of how Namibian or African youths use their mobile phones to engage in regional and local politics, one should now design a study that covers all the country's regions (it would be interesting to see how the results compare across regions). Also, my research was semi-ethnographic; but if we wish to explore the relationships and the various discourses and motives of young people in the area of political participation and civic engagement, a full ethnography will be needed. But, on the positive side, this research provides valuable insight into an important yet under-researched area: the use of mobile phones as a tool for the political sensitization and mobilization of young people.

The next chapter will turn to the question of how young people use mobile devices to engage their regional leaders in political discussions and civic debates.

CHAPTER 6

Engaging Citizens from Above and from Below *

6.1   INTRODUCTION

In recent years, reports have surfaced on the political engagement practices among civic and political leaders in regional and local authorities in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in Namibia (Loader, Vromen, & Xenos, 2014; Mattes & Richardson, 2015; Helsper, 2012; Wasserman & Garman, 2014; Yamamoto, Kushin, & Dalisay, 2016; Abadie, Diamond, & Hainmueller, 2015). Political leaders are accused of not involving their citizens actively in public debates, political activities, and community projects. Citizens have complained that their government representatives are neither easily accessible nor available to listen to the needs, aspirations, and wants of their communities. This absence prevails, despite government efforts to construct regional councillors' offices in all the constituencies around the country and to provide mobile phones, phone allowances, Internet connectivity, and a car designed to reach communities regardless of the geographic location of the villages. It is not known whether young citizens and political leaders really use these facilities as the government intended, namely to interact in order to strengthen an inclusive democracy. Against this background, the present chapter explores the ways in which young people use mobile phones to engage with political leaders on matters of regional and local politics in the Ohangwena region.

Over the years, political communication scholars have developed an increasing interest in the participation of young people in civic and political activities, especially in the global South. Most of these studies focused on participation in elections, protests, and entertainment and on the use of new media in politics (Hirzalla, van Zoonen, & de Ridder, 2010; Loader et al., 2014; Mattes & Richardson, 2015; Mpofu, 2013; Quintelier & Vissers, 2008). Their authors posited that new media can facilitate and even enhance participatory democracy and political communication in the global South. Most of the studies conducted so far have been looking at conventional political participation or at the civic engagement of the youth in urban activities. To complete the picture, this chapter aims at exploring how young citizens interact with their political representatives and engage them in political activities in the region.

6.2   POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES AT REGIONAL AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE LEVELS

The spectacular changes in new media that happen continuously under our eyes and how they can influence citizens' political participation and civic engagement in democratic processes are themes that have dominated debate in the global South no less than in the global North (see Loader et al., 2014; Mchakulu, 2007; Republic of Namibia, 2014; Van Belle & Cupido, 2013; Wasserman, 2011). Reports such as the ones cited here testify to the fact that

contemporary political and public consumerism do pay heed to changes in digital media technology. What is more, they attempt to show the ways in which these changes have influenced both political participation as a whole (Kahne, Middaugh, Lee, & Feezell, 2011) and young people's decision-making at regional and local governance levels.

Several studies (Mattes & Richardson, 2015; Helsper, 2012; Wasserman & Garman, 2014) reported that practices of engaging the youth in civic and political debates run by politicians were conducted in a way that led to the current decline in youth political participation. The upshot is that – as also explained here in previous chapters – young citizens came to feel excluded and not valued (Yamamoto et al., 2016). This decline is becoming worrisome in African democracies and especially in rural areas of young democracies such as Namibia, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, and Tanzania. Citizens in these countries accuse political leaders at regional and local governance levels of nurturing or promoting exclusive democracy (Kahne, Hodgin, & Eidman-Aadahl, 2016; Kahne, Lee, & Feezell, 2013; Kahne et al., 2011). These citizens claim that not all of them are given equal opportunities to partake in political and public discussions; some have fewer platforms than others, and only a few well-off and well-connected individuals really have a say in regional and local political deliberations (Helsper, 2012). As a result of such complaints, leaders working with regional and local authorities, political parties, and other civil society organizations are reportedly identifying appropriate strategies that can motivate the youth to engage actively in public discussions (Helsper, 2012; Kahne et al., 2011). It is envisaged that these discussions should promote an inclusive democracy; thus they should also help to dismantle exclusive democracy, which can destabilize peace and harmony in the communities (Kahne et al., 2011; Ward, 2010; Ward & de Vreese, 2011).

Inclusive democracy is defined as a system of governance in which all citizens, regardless of their age, political affiliations, gender, level of education, geographical distance, and social status participate equally in the discussion of sociopolitical issues, in order to incentivize the delivery of services in governance structures and make it effective at all levels (Helsper, 2012; Wasserman & Garman, 2014). Such services can be initiatives that target the less privileged in society (e.g. children, youths, marginalized rural groups) and give them an opportunity for direct contact and exchanges with their leaders on political, cultural, economic, technological, and developmental issues in their communities (Norris, 2001); and such exchanges usually lead to positive change and growth in those communities. By contrast, exclusive democracy is a system in which, in any governance structure, some of the citizens are not given platforms for partaking in political and public discussions on the same footing as others (Kahne et al., 2016; Kahne et al., 2013; Kahne et al., 2011). As already mentioned, in this type of system only a few well-off individuals participate actively in civic and political deliberations designed to improve life (Helsper, 2012). The corollary is that an exclusive democracy leaves out the poor, the unemployed, the young, children, and the geographically disadvantaged, who have little or no power to influence political and civic

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decisions concerning the social upliftment of their communities (Kahne et al., 2011; Helsper, 2008; Kibere, 2016). This explains claims made by Mattes and Richardson (2015) and others – claims already familiar from previous chapters – that young people are now disengaged from political, civic, and decision-making activities, especially in sub-Saharan Africa.

New media such as mobile phones are reported to be the appropriate tools that can enhance inclusive and participatory democracy in this digital era (see Mpofu, 2013; Quintelier & Vissers, 2008; Van Belle & Cupido, 2013; Wasserman, 2011). Contemporary studies reveals that new media create a new public platform, which is accessible to all citizens regardless of their age, affiliations, gender, level of education, geographical distance, and social status (Helsper, 2012; Wasserman & Garman, 2014); and this kind of accessibility has the potential to facilitate equal engagement in regional sociopolitical issues. This brings me to the main theme and aim of this chapter: to explore the interaction of young people with their political leaders in the region via mobile phones.

Some reports (Kibere, 2016; IPPR, 2015b) claim that leaders at the regional and local level, especially in the global South, do not fully engage the youths under their jurisdiction in civic and political activities, or even that they make themselves inaccessible. As a result of this attitude, some youths find politics less interesting and less attractive (Mattes & Richardson, 2015) and prefer to stay away from it. I have already broached this theme repeatedly in earlier chapters. Mattes and Richardson (2015) point out that, when measured in amounts of individual contact with local councillors, citizen engagement with the local government is very low in South Africa – both in absolute terms and in relation to other African countries (though various pieces of evidence suggest that participation is increasing).

Here it should be noted that there are numerous types of citizen engagement in regional and local authority governance. For example one can participate via websites of political parties or via government ministries; one can get involved in improvement activities or in town and village projects; and one can manifest oneself as a political agent through political behaviours such as voting, petition drives, and hearings (see Kang & Gearhart, 2010). Out of these various forms of political action, voting is generally considered the most common and most basic. But electoral participation itself encompasses several other processes – getting involved in election campaigns, organizing them, attending meetings, attempting to access information on different political parties (Kang & Gearhart, 2010). Other forms of participation require citizens to engage in grassroots politics within their local communities by attending gatherings and interacting with their local political representatives, for example regional councillors and traditional authority leaders. Finally, participatory activity extends to attending civil protests and signing petitions on various issues, online or offline, as well as joining interest groups such as youth forums that engage in lobbying or political advocacy. Quintelier and Vissers (2008) identify online voting and the forwarding of emails with political content as political activities that can be carried out digitally by youths.

It is against this background that regional and local authority councillors, as political

representatives elected by their communities, play an important role regarding the involvement of youths in decision-making processes. This role is to foster activism. The community expects its leaders to deliver what they promised their constituencies before elections. It is therefore important that residents should feel free to communicate with their local councillor to ensure that he or she is fulfilling his or her mandate (Van Belle & Cupido, 2013).

Various studies on political engagement, youth activism, social media and the youth, digital citizenship and e-governance, as well as political consumerism have been conducted so far in the global North and global South. Most of these studies either look at the general population or infrastructure development or are based on western countries. Very few studies (Mattes & Richardson, 2015; Mpofu, 2013; Van Belle & Cupido, 2013; Wasserman, 2011) have been carried out in the field of citizen engagement in politics, with the aim of determining whether and how civic and political leaders use new media to engage young citizens in politics in southern Africa; and none so far has been devoted to Namibia. There are instead areas of ambiguity and numerous disagreements among researchers about the use of mobile phones as engagement tools and about their capacity to enhance effective participatory democracy. The present chapter intends to be the first study of this kind in Namibia. It also hopes to contribute to clarifying ambiguities and settling disagreements.

In Namibia, youths interviewed during the 2014 Afrobarometer survey also complained that leaders were using wrong platforms, such as face-to-face meetings, to communicate with their communities (IPPR, 2015b). Hence this IPPR report recommended that civic and political leaders create a public sphere that should function as a virtual space in which citizens are able to engage in conversations. This is because citizens need to be guaranteed freedom of assembly and association, as well as the opportunity to express and publish their opinions – especially young people who need to be groomed and prepared for future leadership positions. Other studies, too (Gachau, 2016; LSE Enterprise Limited, 2013; Van Belle & Cupido, 2013; ECN, 2015), suggested that political leaders should create a public space that could draw all citizens into a wide conversation, at the same time guaranteeing them freedom of assembly and association and the opportunity to express and publish their opinions.

But there is a significant limitation to this digital involvement of citizens: the lack of understanding of, and exposure to, political issues among the youth. Even if youths have access to the Internet, this does not automatically guarantee that they spend time engaging in civic activities or political debates; in fact most of them do not bother with anything that does not bring remuneration. This shortcoming is very important to remedy, and it relates to the political education of the youth. It has indeed been argued that, at least at regional and local government level (ECN, 2015; Mattes & Richardson, 2015), there is less emphasis on political education and less awareness of its role in harnessing young people's use of new media so as to channel it towards civic and political activities.

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Pătrut and Pătrut (2014) show that citizen engagement is a potential way of escaping the topdown politics of mass democracy, in which political parties and civic societies or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) formulate policies with low-level participation or youth involvement. If this is true, then new media would contribute a lot. They provide the means for a high differentiation of political information and ideas, theoretical possibilities of participation, a high level of involvement in negotiations, and feedback between leaders and followers. They also publicize the collective participation of civic and political leaders in the activities of the broader community, for example discussion of civic affairs with community residents, involvement in political affairs, membership in formal or informal groups, and attendance to political hearings and rallies (Kang & Gearhart, 2010).

To respond to this call for the creation of a public space of civic conversation, the Namibian government constructed regional offices and equipped councillors with mobiles, Internet connectivity, and other features designed to make them accessible and put then within easy reach of their electorates (ECN, 2015). At this stage, little is known as to whether politicians and young people in Namibia are really using these platforms to carry out civic and political dialogue. As I mentioned before, not a single study of this country can be traced that has so far explored the use of the mobile phone as a tool for public and political engagement; hence the in-depth nature of the present research.

And this is the place where, before presenting my findings in this chapter, I should restate the leading question of this study: How do young people in Ohangwena use the mobile phone to interact with civic and political leaders and to take part in regional and local politics? How does the mobile phone function as an engagement tool in the project of enhancing an inclusive digital democracy?

6.3   FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents findings from the ethnographic fieldwork that I carried out in the Ohangwena region.

The overall result is that, despite the construction of offices for political leaders and despite the provision of mobile smartphones and phone allowances, the regional leadership is more successful in engaging the public offline: there are more practices of political participation offline than online. Additionally, young people's mobile phone-driven engagement in political matters is scarce. This result is causally related to young people's claim that leaders cannot be reached on their mobiles 24/7 and to the perception that officials at constituency offices are not youth-friendly. In addition, too many political protocols need to be followed by young people when they wish to see the councillors; this is the opposite of the open-door policy claimed by the councillors themselves and constitutes an important obstacle to youth involvement. Finally, on the positive side, it appears that there is a will

for political engagement among the young people of Ohangwena: this will is not missing, but needs to be properly developed and channelled. Another possibly promising sign is that, during election, leaders showed greater willingness to make themselves accessible on their mobiles. On the basis of my findings, one can state that the entry of the mobile phone into the political sphere has produced less inclusivity than anticipated. Yet there are reasons to hope for better results in the future, if we really make the effort to understand these processes.

My exploration took me to four key areas of investigation: (1) the typical everyday experiences of a regional leader (something that could come under the heading 'a day in the life of…'); (2) the process of engaging citizens in civic and political activities; (3) the tools of engagement; and (4) challenges or obstacles facing the use mobile phones by political leaders in the region. The findings are presented according to the themes that emerged during data analysis, which provide the subheadings in this section.

6.3.1   Mobile Engagement, Access, and Politics

At the time of the research, all regional councillors had a government vehicle and an office administration block from which to operate. They were equipped with a mobile smartphone and received a monthly cell phone allowance of N$1,000. This was done to ensure that they were reachable whenever they were needed, be it by citizens or by other senior government officials. A few councillors were active on Facebook, but most of them were reported to be on the regional WhatsApp group, which had been created specifically for them as a communication and discussion platform, in case some urgent piece of news needed to be shared with the citizens (Gachau, 2016). The regional WhatsApp group was mainly used by councillors among themselves; but they also had a WhatsApp group with the citizens. I was not given access or permission to join this WhatsApp regional group because this is a closed platform, not open to citizens; councillors discuss there various issues before they share them on the platform open to the public.

The councillors, who resided in areas with poor network connectivity, usually drove daily to places close by where they had a network and could communicate with others. 'Councillors are people's servants and should be living with their citizens all the time in their respective constituencies', declared Councillor 4. Most councillors told me that they encouraged their citizens, especially the youth, to approach or contact them at any time, 24/7, if they wished to raise an issue with their local councillor.

> We (regional councillors) encourage the youth that, if they want to engage us, we are 24 hours available through mobiles … if you have a problem or you want to share something with us, [it] is better to call the time you feel like you want, the time you are free … then talk to me as your government representative and we can try to engage you in discussions and conversations in the direction you want your problem to be attended to. (Councillor 1, September 2016)

This response, reproduced here verbatim, suggests that regional councillors give their mobile numbers to all citizens in their constituencies, on a regular basis, for communication purposes. This prompted me to enquire whether young people indeed had their councillors' mobile numbers and whether councillors were accessible all the time, as they claimed. Most youths confirmed that the majority of the councillors gave out their numbers freely to the public.

> Yes for example Councillor [X] for [constituency A] and Councillor [Y] for [constituency B] are doing their best to announce their phone numbers in public and invite youths to interact with them. (Sela, male, 35-year-old car-wash attendant)

However, these youths also added that, although they had mobile numbers for their councillors, they struggled to reach them. For example Ndam, a 26-year-old female teacher, made the following remark during a focus group discussion:

> The councillor is not accessible in most cases on his phone, as he seems to be a busy man. He will always refer you to the office phone, to talk [to] the officials there, and he tends to only answer those people he knows … This means that, even if the phone is accessible, available and one can call the councillor, but will not be helped, I don't think this is what we call 'reachable' on his phone … Generally the political leaders are not reachable on their mobile phones every time; but during election time their phones are ever on, even during the night time, but after election things tend to change.

This assertion contradicts the councillors' claim that they were available on their mobiles 24/7 to all citizens in their community, for discussions and suggestions. It became clear that, even if the mobile number of their councillor was available to youths, they still could not get hold of that councillor to talk to him or her directly. When they were calling they would either not receive an answer or be referred back to administrators at the constituencies' offices, and they felt that even there they did not receive adequate responses. These 'ground realities' or facts on the ground in rural Namibia are in sharp contrast with the ideal of what new media could in principle achieve for political engagement – as stated for example by Alonso and Lippez-De Castro (2016). These researchers find that the technology should be used so as to engage and empower citizens, facilitate and support active participation, and help grassroots ideas to influence the political agenda in regional and local governance structures in a bottom-up fashion.

The response that I quoted here from my participant also informs us that councillors tend to be more readily available to answer and discuss issues with citizens in their constituencies during elections – and only then. Leaving aside the obvious opportunistic interpretation of this short-term availability, its existence could perhaps be used as a window of opportunity on which youths may build in the future.

6.3.2   Experience and Community Interaction

My research indicated that civic and political leaders had different levels of education as well as different employment backgrounds: some were teachers or school principals, whereas others had been in those political positions any length of time between one and twenty-two years. I also noticed that not all the councillors were Internet-literate or supported the use of new media; furthermore, some lived in urban areas, others in the rural or semi-rural parts of the region. Some leaders and politicians were past their retirement age; only a few were in their early forties. But most of them, with their combined experience, made it clear that they enjoyed and loved what they were doing – which involved interacting with people, learning many new things, and making a difference in the lives of others. This was the driving force that made them stay on in their positions. 'You know, interacting with community members, is the most thing I like … when you are with people … you learn a lot from their views and also their experiences, what they want, their wishes and their aspirations', remarked Councillor 3 in August 2016.

The councillors I interviewed described their jobs as most challenging and difficult: this was because citizens expected them to bring development to the community regardless of the constraints they were facing. They were most of the time out of their offices because they had to conduct public meetings in different villages of their constituencies; and this is the reason why they share their mobile numbers with residents of the community. This validates the debate started by Matsusaka (2005), who claims that public or town-hall meetings are a popular form of direct democracy with a long history behind it: this form has been used by political leaders since long ago. According to Matsusaka, citizens used to assemble at a particular time and place, in their village or town, to make public decisions on behalf of their communities. I attended quite a few public meetings in the region, some of them addressed by various political leaders.

It also emerged from my focus group discussions with the young that their councillors were performing a difficult and challenging job. But it became clear at the same time that both the citizens and their councillors need to have some direct interactions, which would certainly strengthen direct democracy in the region. Matsusaka (2005) claims that direct democracy is fuelled at least in part by the revolution in communications technology, which has given ordinary citizens unprecedented access to information and has heightened their desire to participate directly in policy decisions.

6.3.3   Open-Door Policy, Favouritism, and Face-to-face Public Engagement

I observed that most of the councillors tried to engage their residents in civic and political activities by inviting and encouraging them to attend public and community meetings, town-hall meetings, or other information-sharing gatherings in the region. They had an open-door policy and usually let residents know that they were there to serve them (Van Belle & Cupido, 2013), so that residents should feel comfortable about approaching them

with anything they were not happy about or that needed improvement. On the strength of this claim made by the councillors, I asked young people whether their councillors were easily approachable. Martha, a 33-year-old security guard, said:

> Relatively speaking councillors, though not all in Ohangwena region, have an open-door policy … however, it is the people working for these politicians that make it difficult for the youth to reach the councillors anytime at their offices, because when such leaders are in meetings, their phones are answered by secretaries and these secretaries sometimes are not youth-friendly.

This response reveals that, although the open-door policy existed, the young citizens still found it difficult to meet their councillors face to face due to the strict hierarchy and protocols in place at their offices (Matthews, Limb, & Taylor, 2000), which made them less 'serving' than they claimed to be. This situation rendered mobile phones less useful as a platform for young people who wished to have direct contact with their government representatives in the region. Councillors' engagement activities ranged from community and villages meetings to committee meetings, political party rallies, campaigning events and other activities (IPPR, 2015b), and all these enabled them to listen to the residents under their care and learn about issues that affected these residents' lives. They discussed various matters at these sessions, for example updates on the drought relief food distribution programmes, the issuing of birth certificates, road and other infrastructural development, water shortage and network connectivity (just to mention a few topics). On the question of whom they engaged in public discussions and political events, one councillor, who had been in this position for more than sixteen years, said: 'I engaged myself in public meetings, engaging youths in meetings, engaging traditional authority leaders as well as representatives of different stakeholders, both in the region and at constituency levels' (Councillor 2, 2016).

According to their own statements, councillors addressed and tried to engage all citizens, regardless of their political affiliations, ethnic background, or age. Their appeal applied equally to traditional leaders, the youth, and other stakeholders in the region, for example the business community and other professionals who could give them guidance. Being fascinated by this, I asked young citizens whether they felt engaged in civic and political discussions in the region by the councillors, regardless of their affiliations, status, and other differentials. One young person said:

> To a certain extent, yes … councillors engage youths in community discussions or activities regardless of their political affiliations … but … I am one of the youths who are trying to interact with councillors and in most cases the governor, but these people tend to respond or listen positively and timely only to those they know. (Tim, 35, unemployed)

During the meetings that I attended as part of my research, councillors tried to give answers and feedback on any question that arose; when they did not have an answer, they usually promised residents that they would get back to them on the matter. But Tim's assertion reveals that the phenomenon of political favouritism and discrimination based on personality was also at work in these communities and made it difficult for all the young people to get in touch with their regional leaders.

6.3.4 Radio and Social Media Engagement

On the question of how they communicate with members of their communities, one councillor said:

> We use to call public meetings through the radio … but currently as I am speaking [it] is hard to get youths to community meetings … our youths are far away in urban areas in some cities or towns … but actually they are from the constituency but you want to engage them. (Councillor 3, September 2016)

The main platform that councillors were using in order to ensure that all residents get feedback from them was the public meetings they conducted. However, some councillors and the young citizens interviewed in the focus group discussions said that only elderly people turned up for these meetings; the young did not really attend. But this kind of situation was a threat to inclusive democracy – the very type that these councillors were out to represent and promote. Alonso and Lippez-De Castro (2016) stated that an inclusive and equitable governance involves multiple actors – all the people and communities who are interacting, collaborating, and deliberating on public affairs. Conversely, excluding some actors from the governance system promotes an exclusive democracy, in which many citizens feel left out and sidelined. The absence of young people from public meetings and the looming threat to democracy that it represented became a concern for most of the leaders in the region; hence they began to look for some other ways of getting in touch with the youth so as to maintain inclusivity in their governance. One of the respondents stated that, in the process of looking for a solution,

> I have introduced a social media platform, Facebook page for my constituency and … am about to move to WhatsApp. … At least to accommodate all the youths from the constituency. And sometimes they are far: it doesn't mean that they don't want to attend this community meetings but just because they are very far, that is why I thought outside the box by saying [to myself], why can't I introduce a page on Facebook, so that I can engage the youths who are out of the region, out of constituency. At least to hear their views. (Councillor 4, 2016)

Several other civic and political leaders in the region made statements along similar lines. Once they knew that most of the young people were on Facebook and other online

platforms, they followed them there: they decided to go where the young citizens were, in order to convey messages and information to them. One of them said:

> I have realized that most of the youth are always on Facebook, so we created a page with the name of our constituency, so whenever I have something that's where I post the information and we are always interacting with each other. (Councillor 6, August 2016)

These words suggest that social media have become an instrument for young people engagement. This idea received support from Alonso and Lippez-De Castro (2016), who found that technology can facilitate interactions among citizens and between citizens, government, and other actors, thus playing an important role in improving efficiency and effectiveness in communications and public service delivery.

But how do things work from the other end, when youths attempt to initiate the contact? Do social media work any better than simple phone calls? I have asked some of the youths whether their councillors could be reached more easily on social media, and here is a typical answer:

> There are few councillors who are using different media to interact with youth […] for example [X], who has a WhatsApp group for the youth, a Facebook page for his constituency and he put his phone on disposal at all times […] but some other councillors are not trying their level best to reach out to youths. (Emmy, 34, unemployed)

Public officials and leaders interviewed in this study confessed that, for the most part, they were using traditional media such as the NBC Oshiwambo Radio and newspapers. This was because, in general, a large number of people had radios in their houses, even though the young appeared not to listen to the radio and only a few of them had access to newspapers – especially youths who lived in towns such as Eenhana, Okongo, Oshikango, and Ondobe and in other semi-urban areas (see details on this in chapter 5). However, these officials and leaders also listed social media platforms: they wanted to move in step with technology. But here they raised a concern. The new media were good, they said, but there was a twofold problem associated with them. One negative aspect was poor network connectivity, at least in some villages; the other was poverty, which was linked with the fact that the region had the highest rate of unemployment, especially among the young. Poverty affected digital engagement in politics insofar as citizens could not afford to buy a mobile phone or, if they possessed one, might find it difficult to recharge it so as to access the Internet or social media platforms. This ties in with the finding, revealed in some studies, that citizens, especially young ones, sacrifice some of their income to ensure that they have enough credit or data bundles for social media platforms (Wasserman, 2011; Wasserman 2014).

One councillor declared: 'I am using different platforms: face-to-face community

meeting; community radio, which is NBC in Lungada in the morning and Eyakulo in the afternoon; and also newspapers like *Kundana*' (Councillor 6, 2016). We can clearly see that the region's civic and political leaders tried to use a variety of platforms for the sake of engaging their citizens and establishing a strong relationship with them. They also tried to tackle community problems with a view to improving people's lives.

6.3.5   Politainment

I witnessed several events in the region where young people were invited either by the councillor or by other regional leader to attend a presentation. One such event was a town-hall meeting that took place at Eenhana Multipurpose Youth Center. The theme for this meeting was how to enhance youth public participation in the law-making process. The meeting was addressed by the chair of the National Council of Namibia. The regional councillor was assigned the task of inviting the general public. He made an announcement via the Oshiwambo radio and also sent word to the youth forum chairperson, asking him to inform all the youths in the region. Attendance was very poor and the public consisted mainly of adults and included a few traditional leaders. The poor attendance was attributed to the fact that the meeting took place between 10 a.m. and 13 p.m., when the largest part of the population is at work. Another probable (in fact very likely) reason was that most people did not receive the message, since the councillor's announcement was usually made about 07 a.m., when they were on their way to work. The youth forum group from Khomas region was invited to entertain the audience with drama and songs: the main aim was for the group to explain the functions of the National Council of Namibia in the form of a drama. The result was very entertaining. People were dancing, some were taking pictures. It was actually a very pleasant and educative event, but only a few attended it because the majority did not know about it; they had not received the message.

The Ondobe youth forum had a similar group, which performed at various events in the region. Some members were present at these events and were very happy about them. I talked to a few young citizens at the end of one such event and asked them what they did to prepare these meetings, how they rehearsed for performance, and how they attracted and entertained their audiences. Sela, an unemployed 23-year-old, explained:

> When we meet we come up with different ideas of looking for music, steps, and dramas and for motivating each other, so that our group will continue to move forward, we encouraged other youths to join and we go to schools showing them what we have prepared in our club.

With the assistance of the youth officer, the group received funding from the Ministry of Youth and Sport for uniforms and for equipment such as speakers, a laptop, a printer, and t-shirts. At most of the events, group members performed voluntarily; however, there were times they were invited to perform and received money from their forum. Sometimes

their performances endeavoured to create awareness of HIV/AIDS or of the possible consequences of teenage pregnancy. This is what Wilhem, a 28-year-old forum member, said about education theatre:

> We did a drama about alcohol and drug abuse as well as pregnancies. That drama, we did it at school, to educate those school learners who do not know how to behave when they have boyfriends and about the dangers of alcohol.

There were also some dramas about corruption and the effect it had on the Namibian economy, as well as about how it could destabilize peace and social harmony in the country. Group members usually rehearsed for several days before they actually performed. Most of the youths strongly believed that, once entertainment and drama featured in political or community meetings, many other youths would attend and in this way would gain something important.

This entertainment is not used online but offline: it is live, and designed to sustain political engagement. I observed that most of the young people were taking pictures on their mobiles; some were even recording. Then they shared these pictures and recordings on various platforms such as Facebook pages or WhatsApp groups; and they shared them with others, who were not engaged in political activities. Malakia, a 32-year-old teacher and forum member, stated: 'Mostly we use music and drama to catch the attention of those in attendance. Otherwise they will not listen to the presenter and will go back without getting any message.' He further explained that the point is '[n]ot only [to get] attention but also to pass on the message to others', in other words to deliver some 'public information'.

Not everyone accepts this idea. There are researchers, for example Hao, Wen, and George (2014), who claim, by contrast, that traditional mass media are not effective in stimulating interest in politics and in promoting civic engagement among young people today. But the views I quoted here show that participatory politics can be enhanced through the use of drama, music, concerts, and other types of performance that attract young people. The messages in those songs or performances should be clear and people should be able to understand them easily instead of only following the drum sounds. This use of entertainment for civic and political ends lends credence to the idea, supported by Kümpel, Karnowski, and Keyling (2015), that chat applications such as WhatsApp can be a major traffic driver for news sites, sharing of video and live streaming of events; and, not surprisingly, a lot of news sites have recently added a WhatsApp-sharing button to their collection of social media-sharing shortcuts.

6.4   CONCLUSION

The research I presented in this chapter led me to the following conclusions.

Although politicians called themselves public servants, allowed their mobile numbers to be known among their communities, and claimed on this basis that they were available 24/7, as a matter of course most of them would not answer their mobiles, especially when young citizens were calling them. The young participants in my study concurred that they were regularly being referred to their councillors' offices to make appointments. Hence politicians did not really make themselves available to young citizens just by divulging or making public their mobile phone numbers, as they were claiming. The findings further revealed that staff members in those offices were not youth-friendly. All this means that the political leadership did not 'nurture' inclusive digital democracy – not effectively, in any case. What is more, there were also signs of exclusive digital democracy, as defined by some researchers (Helsper, 2012; Skuse, Fildes, Tacchi, Martin, & Baulch, 2007), insofar as some citizens felt excluded from public discussions.

The findings show that most politicians made themselves available 24/7 on their mobiles, but only during election campaigns. Such a pattern proves that they could stay in touch with their communities if they wanted to, but chose not to do it for the rest of the year. This behaviour is what discouraged young people most and alienated them from the entire political process. Their regional leaders seemed to be only interested in them only during elections, when they needed their vote and their support; after that, the same leaders did not care about them any more. This is what my participants all believed. What they described is in effect a selective democracy – that is, the kind of democracy that shows awareness of and respect for citizens only during critical times, when politicians need to motivate citizens to vote for them (Al-Dalou & Abu-Shanab, 2013; Mossberger & Jimenez, 2009).

However, there is a positive side to this. On the one hand, as I just noted, the fact that politicians are available to the public 24/7 at certain times indicates that this possibility exists; hence such periods need to be multiplied and extended. On the other hand, the reasons for politicians' lack of availability during 'normal' times are in reality quite complex; these people are often engaged for days on end in public activities that involve continuous meetings and travel. Many of the councillors I interviewed came across as dedicated, even passionate about what they do. If these features are put together, it should be possible to plot a constructive outcome and a good way forward.

Nevertheless, for the time being, my findings in the area of mobile phone contact between young people and their regional leaders are negative: there is less mobile engagement than expected – both of leaders by youths and vice versa. More generally, there is still too much top-down approach to citizen engagement in the region. This may

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well be one of the deep reasons why the young have difficulty discussing political issues with their leaders via an equalizing instrument such as the mobile phone.

On a different line, it became clear in the course of my investigations that political entertainment and outreach programmes such as songs, drama, and music can be successfully used as tools to attract young citizens and to persuade them to join political groups in the region. Therefore this study recommends further support for a political education theatre in the regional youth forum. The management team should strengthen this form of theatre and all related initiatives, in the interest of increasing young people's participation in politics, especially at regional and local governance level.

Finally, a word must be said about the limitations of the research behind this study. Data were collected only from Ohangwena, which is one out of the fourteen political regions in Namibia; and only 50 per cent of the political leadership in the region took part in the data collection process. This surely influenced the type of narratives presented in this study. Additionally, the data collection instruments were qualitative in nature and required the presence of researchers during interviews. This may have contributed to the fact that the data provided by participants were less concrete than expected in a quantitative study. This chapter recommends that future studies should use quantitative methods of data collection and should cover more than one political region, in order to obtain a general view of political leaders in the whole country and in its different parts.

In our contemporary world, mobile engagement practices have implications on political inclusiveness and decision-making, as mobile phones are now becoming digital platforms. Citizens in the global South tend to use them to contact their political representatives about all sorts of public issues, with the aim of improving the standards of living. In Namibia, the increase in mobile phone subscriptions is accompanied by the implementation of an e-governance policy by the Namibian government and – significantly – by a call from the head of state to create and nurture an inclusive house, where no citizens should feel left out. The next chapter focuses on how the young people use mobile social media in regional and local politics to foster inclusive democracy and to promote equal opportunities and digital literacy.
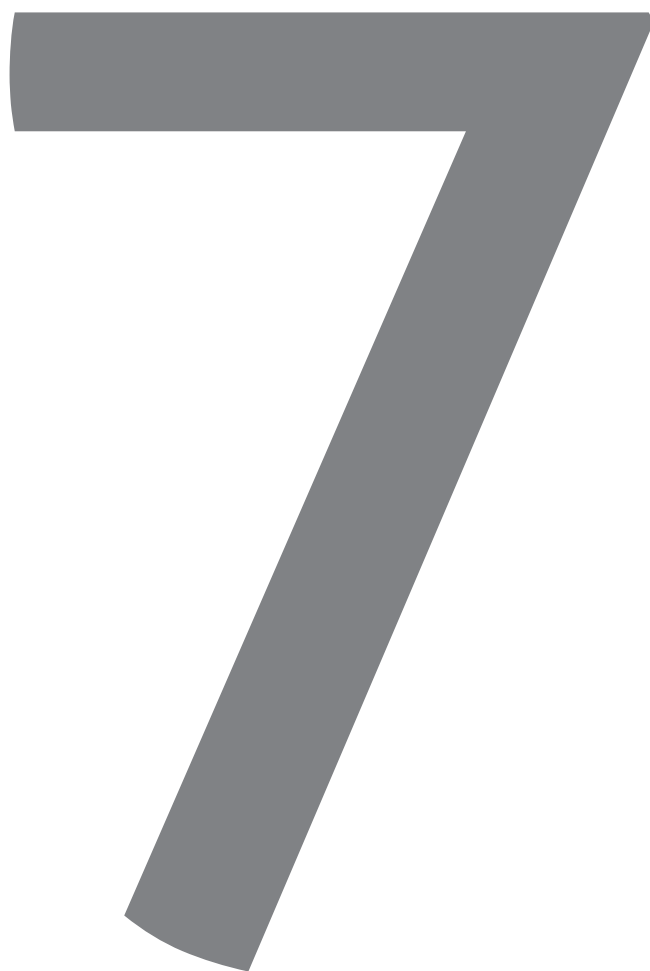
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CHAPTER 7

Mobile Social Media and Political Digital Literacy *

7.1   INTRODUCTION

In the past five years, Namibia has experienced an increase in the presence of people on social media platforms. This has generated various debates concerning the impact of such a phenomenon on citizen engagement in the political sphere.

Studies from the global North have already established a vibrant tradition of scholarship about the transformative influence that digital platforms have on direct democracy, with limited empirical evidence as to whether such influence extends beyond the West. The high presence of youths on social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Twitter in recent years elicited from political communication scholars a strong orientation of this discourse towards the youth and the theme of their involvement in politics and civic activities. Most of these studies were conducted in the United States and in Europe (in the United Kingdom and Italy, for instance). By contrast, only a few have been conducted in sub-Saharan African countries – for example in Nigeria, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Kenya, and Ghana. This chapter focuses on the role of digital literacy in enabling political engagement in one region of Namibia.

Many scholars believe that social media can reach and be used by many people who previously found it difficult to participate in politics or public affairs; and youngsters belong in this category, alongside the disabled and other marginalized communities. Such scholars have reached the important conclusion that social media, especially Facebook, have a stimulating effect on youth participation and engagement (Castells, 2009; Ellison, Lampe, & Steinfield, 2009; Erkul & Kes-Erkul, 2009; Shirky, 2008; Stiegler, 2008; Yamamoto, Kushin, & Dalisay, 2016). Hence they are positive about the idea of using social media as discussion platforms suitable for the youth – platforms where young people can debate among themselves and influence one another regarding all sorts of activities, in their own contexts (see Fenton & Barassi, 2011; Gachau, 2016; Loader, Vromen, & Xenos 2015; Yamamoto et al., 2016). These activities can be extremely varied – Egyptian elections, Kenyan elections, South African youth protests against corruption, or land distribution; and they can be political or not.

In spite of the digital divide, which is a big obstacle in Africa, previous studies (e.g. Sarrazin, 2011) point out that African youths are already accessing social media platforms on a daily basis, using their mobile phones. And indeed, more recent evidence confirms that 80 per cent of Facebook users in Africa access the site by mobile phone (Mackey, 2016). This is what necessitated the present research: it was vital to explore in detail young Namibians' use of the mobile phone as a social media channel, especially in relation to regional and local politics.

The presence of youths on social media platforms can be seen as an embodiment of Paulo Freire's theory of a pedagogy of the oppressed, as well as of his popular critical literacy ideology, which aims at creating a platform for the critical discussion of topical issues in

society (when an individual knows and understand the environment around him). At the same time, such phenomena can be seen to fall under critical, social, and digital literacy, since all digitally excluded members of the population, be they old people or out-of-school youths, will be able to take part in public discussions aimed at improving the standard of living in their communities (Freire, 2000). This means that all citizens will use social media platforms as digital avenues for communication, deliberation, politics – everything. But, of course, for this to happen, citizens must be digitally literate and socially informed. Some optimistic scholars – for example Ostling (2010) – believe that digital and critical literacy enables citizens to use social media in a low-cost manner and thereby promotes political knowledge, interest in politics, and with it participatory activities such as discussion and voting.

7.2 THE SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE OF CONSTITUENCY YOUTH FORUMS

The regional youth forum had a Facebook account under the name Ohangwena Regional Youth Forum (ORYF) and a WhatsApp group with the same name, to which all the members with smartphones had access. The ORYF Facebook pages had 481 members at the time of analysis (November 2016). The name of this group is Ohangwena Regional Youth Forum. Most of its members were male. They were from all walks of life: ministers in government, chief executive officers, teachers and principals, priests and pastors, as well as young political party representatives in Namibia. Some members – 35 per cent, to be precise – were unemployed, others were school or university students. Some were from Ohangwena, others from the neighbouring regions. Some of the youths from Ohangwena had jobs outside the region or got married in other parts of the country; to these, the Facebook pages offered a chance to participate in civic and political activities and interact with fellow members of their old community. Age on these platforms can range from 16 to 72 years. Given this wide variation, I have programmed Wordstat software to display each Facebook member's date of birth next to his or her comment or post, for easier analysis.

ORYF is the parent body of all other constituency youth forums in the region and Table 7.1 gives the number of their members. There were constituencies (for example Oshikango) that were not on Facebook, but these had WhatsApp groups that were active.

7.3 FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the findings of my ethnographic fieldwork on the ORYF Facebook pages and on the WhatsApp groups in Ohangwena.

Most members of these platforms were male, university educated, and employed; they lived in urban areas, although they were originally from villages in the region; and

Table 7.1   Youth forums in Ohangwena and their Facebook presence from 2016 on

Group name	Number of members
Ohangwena Regional Youth Forum	481 members
Ondobe Youth Forum	1,000 members
Engela Constituency Youth Forum	6,200 members
Epembe Youth Forum	732 members
Omulonga Constituency Youth Forum	2,900 members
Omundaungilo Youth Group	642 members
Okongo Deltas Youth Trust	90 members
Oshikunde Constituency Youth Forum	58 members
Eenhana Youth Forum: not on Facebook	–
Oshikango Youth Forum: not on Facebook	–

Source: Facebook pages of various groups (2016)

they had smartphones or access to mobile Internet. Most of them participated on all the platforms. Only three of the seven Facebook pages analysed had high participation. But the two WhatsApp groups were, both, showcasing high engagement, as there was a two-way communication between political leaders and citizens. Most of the discussions on these platforms were about employment opportunities offered by political leaders or by members of the ORYF Facebook, scholarships information culled from newspapers or other media houses, community problems such as lack of electricity and water in some areas, and the advertising of services such as printing and photocopying, offered by businesses within the region. Two dominant themes during the period of my research were the teachers' strike and a peaceful demonstration by the youth against the construction of a new parliament; this demonstration took place on 16 June 2016 and will be discussed in detail further on. Overall, contrary to expectations, only a few young people from rural areas participated in these social media discussions; participants from areas with poor connectivity were scarce, too.

The exploration shaped three key areas, which I can summarize under three questions:

1. What kinds of topics are discussed and debated on these online forums?
2. What are the online and offline civic and political activities that young people are involved in?
3. What are the constraints or challenges that affect their social media participation in politics and engagement in public affairs?

7.3.1   Direct and Indirect Digital Democracy

Social media (SM) are praised for their potential to create a space of political engagement for young people – a space where they can share problems and ideas, discuss political matters that affect their daily lives, or advise one another. John, 32, self-employed and the forum's chair, gave me the following picture:

> I also created a WhatsApp group … sometimes we share news, and information there … but that is not for everyone as not everyone has a smartphone to access the group, that's why we still have to use SMS messages or call directly non-smartphone youths, to update them.

Clearly there is a sharp divide between users and non-users of smartphones, and this introduces an element of exclusivity to participation. However, there is an expressed effort to reach out to non-smartphone members to bridge this gap. Although most of the youngsters in rural Ohangwena did not have access to social media on a daily basis, they indicated that they logged on to social media sites occasionally, when they went to town.

Young people can make use of the free calls that normally come with recharge vouchers on WhatsApp. All three mobile operators in Namibia – MTC, Telecom Namibia, and Leo – have free data bundles for Internet and WhatsApp; these come with different recharger vouchers, which cost from N$5.00 (around €0.30) to N$250.00 (around €17). The bundles vary across vouchers. Concerning those members who did not have smartphones and were not on WhatsApp, Caro, the 24-year-old vice-chair, said:

> We try by all means to inform even those without WhatsApp by using our own cell phone credit to call or send them messages to inform them about what's being said on the group. If the chairperson is busy with work, because he is a policeman, I take for responsibility calling and sending texts to these people, because not all of them have WhatsApp-compatible cell phones.

These SMS messages and direct calls were greatly valued by the semi-rural youngsters from Ondobe, Eenhana, Okongo, Oshikango and Ohangwena, as they made them feel part of the political process even though these members could not access the online forums directly.

I asked my young participants whether the use of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram would increase or decrease their chances of engaging in public discussions. Most of them strongly agreed that such use would definitely increase their participation, as they could take part no matter where they were at the time, without having to go in person to the physical site of the meeting; and they described access to social media as 'a complementary tool'. Gab, an unemployed 24-year-old, spoke about how digital media can save them time and costs, especially when they reside in remote areas:

> I also would like to add more about road connections, as some of us we are living deep in the forest, there are just those gravel roads, I cannot even call them roads, even when you are driving, the car get stuck in the sand. We need some help, so that at least we can travel safe and arrive on time … sometimes we are far (even 100 km away) from a tarred road where you can get a taxi to town for meetings, so that we can be updated. So mobile phones really help us to communicate, as we can forward text messages to our colleagues who are far; if I have their number, then it shortens the distance.

Overall, this picture highlights the complexity of the challenge for digital inclusion and gives us a framework for assessing communities' readiness to provide equal and unbiased access to decision-making, employment, and study opportunities in the digital age (Fotopoulos, 1997). While my data show that it is primarily urban and educated male individuals who have control over these online forums, the forum leaders' efforts to use their phone plans and free vouchers to place calls and send text messages to isolated rural members of their group make for a more complex narrative. And the situation described here, particularly by Gab, makes the case that we need to assess digital participation not just directly, as online participation and presence, but also indirectly, by looking beyond the surface, at factors that involve traditional and old technologies. This pushes us to expand the borders of what constitutes digital inclusion and to evaluate strategies for reducing the digital divide gap – for example, by bridging the gulf between old and new media.

7.3.2   Digital Politics: Leisure, Learning, and Labouring for Change

During the seven-month period in which I collected my observations, most of the discussions occurred after working hours. Both youths and political leaders were placing posts and making status updates on these pages mostly during weekends. Some posts and videos were shared around 11 p.m. on weekdays. During the interviews I conducted, the young people stated that they used social media platforms mostly for leisure, especially when they were at home, bored and doing nothing. At such times these political forums turned into entertainment platforms for them, as they brought themselves up to speed with the latest political events in the country and got involved in discussions on matters of regional development. Sed, a 24-year-old woman from the region, unemployed, intimated what moved her to visit the forum's Facebook page and WhatsApp group:

> What motivates me on Facebook and WhatsApp is to talk to friends online and share ideas such job opportunities, studies opportunities and so on with my fellow youths. I stay at home most of the time because I am not employed, and sometimes when I get bored I can login and check what's happening on the forum and get certain information.

Most of the young people told me that they learned about many things on these platforms. Claudia, a 25-year-old local pastor, said:

> We have our page called Oshikunde Youth Constituency where we share ideas. People from Windhoek also update us with information. On WhatsApp we also share news as we do not get newspapers, so we hear things through WhatsApp. We also inform each other about tenders in the constituency.

Young people and political leaders in the region used their leisure time to share, comment, discuss, debate, dialogue and convey information via these platforms. This is consistent

with some research studies, which found that, now more than ever, young people around the world are treating new media such as Facebook, Twitter and mobile phones as venues for social leisure and entertainment while at the same time they use them to engage in learning, political organizing, community building, and other such activities (Arora, 2014; Arora & Rangaswamy, 2014; Mpofu, 2013; Sarrazin, 2011; Wasserman, 2011). They are not just citizens; they are consumers of political entertainment (Van Zoonen, 2005).

I noticed that members of my study groups often took pictures with their mobiles, either from newspapers or from constituency notice boards, and then tended to share them with others, who might not have access to these types of media, even though they were online. They also shared political and commercial videos that carried various messages, for example advertisements for products such as medicines or political songs.

During the period when I was exploring comments, likes, and statuses on these seven pages, one of the issues that dominated discussion was the teachers' strike. As a result of the harsh economic conditions that prevailed in the country in September 2016, teachers demanded a much due salary raise; and the strike was prompted by the failure of the teachers' union and government representatives to reach a bargain agreement. The teachers' union was asking for an 8 per cent increase in the teachers' salaries for the financial year 2016/17. The government, on the other hand, stated that it was prepared to give them only 5 per cent. That provoked the teachers to threaten boycotting the national examinations, which started in September each year. In September 2016 the prime minister wrote a media release in which he published a table that showed the different levels of teachers' salaries; and the table was displayed in all the media houses across the country. This angered members of the teaching fraternity and elicited harsh words and confrontational exchanges among ordinary citizens, youths, teachers, and other stakeholders. Publicizing teachers' salaries was branded unprofessional and unethical, especially in view of the fact that the salaries of politicians, and especially of regional councillors, are never publicized. One of the councillors in the region shared a table on the constituency's Facebook page and asked this question: 'Are teachers being selfish or…?' This earned him more than 63 comments and 27 likes from youths, fellow politicians, and other members of the Facebook page. The majority demanded that the councillor should also share a table with the politicians' salaries, for purposes of comparison with what teachers are earning.

> *Loide* (teacher, 35): Where is the table for politicians? Like councillors?
>
> *Councillor*: Very pathetic. Not even worth publishing.
>
> *Kama* (banker, 33): Just publish it, if you can be able to publish the teachers'…
>
> *Fessy* (politician, 50): We were not born yesterday
>
> *Valo* (teacher, 27): Comrade X, how much is your salary?
>
> *Councillor*: Of course mine is less. But I do not compare myself to a teacher. I am on contract, they are full time.
>
> *Peter* (school principal, 36): Teachers are not being selfish but they are just

demanding what is due to them! They shaped the profession. So there is a reason for them to earn better Hon. Councillor please do not scratch wound but rather heal the wound kamarada! Lol

Valo: For a fair comparison, let the honourable post the tables of politicians from regional councillors to the president, with their recent increments.

Councillor: Leave the comparison and focus on the issue. Why do you have to compare a politician to a professional? The current president is a PhD. Why do you want to compare him to a teacher who holds a mere BETD.[7]

Loide: Typical of politicians… Vote them in power and they will call you selfish when you demand for what is rightfully yours. We are not teachers by political appointment. We are teachers by profession. We studied to get there yet we are still paid less than those who only got appointed because of Tanganyika.[8] Have you called your comrades selfish for increasing their salaries with 6 per mille? Have you called them selfish for stealing millions from SSC, GIPF,[9] Avid, etc.? Have you called them selfish when they increased their allowances by more than 2,000 per cent? My councillor, the wise thing you can do is to withdraw that statement…

Councillor: Politically and tribalistically motivated. Think outside the box!!!

This scenario gives us a glimpse into how social media are used by the young citizens, political leaders and other citizens to discuss, enquire into, and give clarity on issues that affect their everyday life. Replies to comments were coming almost every five minutes and members expressed themselves freely indeed. One important conclusion to draw is that this online forum, while for the most part serving as an entertainment platform, was immediately mobilized into the political sphere when an appropriate critical issue irrupted onto the scene (Papacharissi, 2014). And this carries a deeper lesson for us. The leisure character of these digital spaces stimulates a more forthright and open dialogue than do the physical meetings I witnessed, with all their formalities, seniorities, and decorum of a traditional order, driven by the chair and not by constituency members.

7.3.3   Affective Publics: The Personal and the Political

Observation of these platforms revealed that most of the time members did not really discuss political or civic activities that were topical in their communities. Instead they spent much time posting and discussing matters related to their private lives, such as what they ate at home. They were also in the habit of uploading pictures that documented their presence at

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7   BETD is the Basic Education Teachers Diploma, formally a teaching qualification in Namibia issued by a teachers' college at the end of a three-year teacher education programme.
8   'Tanganyika' is a reference to a group of ageing politicians who founded the currently ruling SWAPO Party.
9   SSC stands for the Social Security Commission; GIPF stands for the Government Institution Pension Fund, an organization that deals with the pensions of all government employees.

wedding parties; and, to a certain extent, they talked about others. This supports Mackey's (2016) conclusion that, although young people *can* use social media to access information and engage in debate and activism, this is not what they are predominantly using social media for. According to this research, young people spend a lot of time chatting to friends and relatives about their love lives and dating, and very little on anything to do with regional development and youth empowerment.

Young people who participated in social media discussions were happy with them and with the posts, comments, and ideas expressed within the WhatsApp groups and on the Facebook pages of their regional youth forum. Alferedo, a 30-year-old teacher, said:

> Yes, I am very happy because most of the time none of the comments are against the spirit of the group or against the youth. What's mostly posted are vacancies (job opportunities) and this can be posted by someone that is not a member anymore as long as they have been added to the group … although there are few individuals that misuse these platforms.

Job vacancies were the most shared of all posts. My exploration of both Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups in the region led me to conclude that many of the young citizens were accessing these platforms in order to share job opportunities or project adverts that required them to submit various proposals for funding, and that this kind of activity was a result of the high rate of unemployment in Ohangwena; it made sense in that context. Many vacancies in government institutions were publicized on these online forums. 'Fellow young people, there are various vacancies at the constituency's office notice board, you would make a detour there for your own benefit,' announced Nalo, a 22-year-old member of the online forum. Not only the young but also some of the regional politicians were posting important information about vacancies and similar things on these platforms. I witnessed much solidarity and team spirit among young people when it came to sharing job opportunities with their fellows as a way of addressing the issue of unemployment and poverty in the region.

Young people also shared their feelings of unhappiness and frustration on certain issues such as the performance of political leaders, favouritism in employment opportunities, youth empowerment initiatives coming from the political leadership, and corruption. At times these emotions reached a heightened level, where some of the youths manifested their anger online by insulting their leaders or their fellows. For example, the politicians were called puppets, enemies of progress, lazy, illiterate, and useless. Sometimes young people posted pornographic videos when they got stuck or were lost for words. The group administrator removed such videos and also blocked these members' access, publicly shaming them for not adhering to the group's or pages' policies. On occasion, the administrator gave the offenders a warning or asked them to apologize to the group. Hendrine, a 29-year-old, blamed it all on the digital nature of this political platform: 'The

disadvantages of Facebook are the Facebook users who insult others and insult elderly members of the community.' As she saw it, digital properties somehow gave people more license to behave in ways that they would have repressed or restrained in the presence of the abused – in this case, if they had attended in person, being physically in the same room with the senior officials they insulted.

Most of the young people had reservations about the truth of what was being said on social media. They believed that some people were 'not serious' about it – for example were joking, or putting on – and this made them approach the whole matter of social media news and information with a healthy dose of scepticism. Here is for example the answer of Job, a 20-year-old labourer and one of the youth forum members, to the question of trusting Facebook as a source of information:

> I only have trust in some posts and statuses, because not every post I see on Facebook has true information even if it is giving good images. I don't need to share it with my group because I do not trust some sources on social media because someone might just post something which does not exist at all.

The findings reported here give an interesting twist to the tale of social media misinformation and abuse of users' trust in the West, particularly in the light of recent developments around fake news (Manning, Penfold-Mounce, Loader, Vromen, & Xenos, 2016) and the manipulation of public sentiment. Platforms such as Facebook have been severely criticized for allowing the circulation of fake news reports. The presence – let alone dominance – of such stories in people's news feed is seen as fostering a culture of misinformation. The verdict is that social networks have had the very harmful effect of disarming and incapacitating their users in the exercise of critical judgement about what is going on the real world: when one inhabits or is confined to these digital leisure networks, a proper evaluation of sources is out of question.

But Namibia is very different from the West, in ways that place its youth at a completely new angle vis-à-vis a phenomenon like the social media – at least when it comes to trust and believability. This country has only recently emerged as a young democracy, but it has a long history of building systematic distrust of political propaganda. Perhaps through these decades of purposeful inoculation against the official version of events, or maybe as a combined result of both factors, the point of departure of most young Namibian citizens in their dealings with social media is clearly that of critical users.

7.3.4   Political Networks are Community Networks

One of the things I observed is that almost any of the young people could suggest a topic for discussion on the day. Sometimes this started spontaneously, with the sharing of a video, government document, or newspaper headlines that the group would start debating about. Some young people on these platforms were eager to discuss issues that affected their communities or the region as a whole. Administrators of the online youth forum supported such initiatives.

Evening my good people, missed you all! Can we come up with a schedule of what we can talk [about] on a specific day to improve our constituency and our region as well? We can even start with a debate on an issue or ask any questions of anything we wanted to know better. Because I can see some experts, such as pastors, politicians, nurses, teachers and youth on this page. I think it will help us if we can use this platform as an educational tool. You can coach me on how to attend or answer interview questions. Please let us educate each other. (Tatuu, 29, police officer)

As a result of this request, a large number of suggestions came in. Young people responded by requesting the mentorship of professionals such as teachers, nurses, pastors, and politicians, with whom they wanted to discuss community issues. They desired to build skills that could make them more job-worthy. A member suggested the topic of answering job interview questions. Most of the others contributed throughout the night. The following day Zulu, aged 36, marketed himself as a mentor and a professional:

Hello every one, I am interested in educating people on financial aspects – how to control, manage, and budget your financial issues; and [I am] educating people on the importance of financial-planning topics … in fact I am a specialist in HIV management.

By disclosing to the group that he was a specialist in human immunodeficiency virus [HIV] management, Zulu encouraged others to ask him questions and to seek advice about that range of problems. He was able to offer digital help to fellow youths in the region despite the geographic boundaries that separated them from him. Such digital training is very useful, as people do not have to travel long distances for some specialist services they need: they can access them online. This capacitates not only the youth but the regional political leadership as well, demonstrating in the process how digital skilling and digital literacy are possible with social media (McGregor, Lawrence, & Cardona, 2017).

Furthermore, some young citizens suggested that they needed to discuss the challenges that faced them in the region and how they could overcome those challenges. One member proposed the question: 'What are the major challenges faced by the youth in our community in realizing their goals and aspirations?' This post attracted many respondents. The discussion thread was very long and ran throughout the night. A flurry of suggestions came in response. One member, 27-year-old youth officer Esta, lamented: 'the big challenge faced by the youth in our constituency is that they do not look for information or [to] familiariz[e] themselves with what is happening around the country'. This view garnered much support, as many people felt that youths do not make sufficient effort to find out and understand what is going on in the region. There was frustration that some of the young people in the constituency did not take it upon themselves to become acquainted with

the country's economic, social, political, technological, and cultural realities. Another young member, 19-year-old self-employed Sig, remarked: 'one of the challenges is the laziness and lack of understanding where the world is heading to. Young people need to be sensitized on the issues that will enhance and develop them.'

Yet other young people came to the defence of their peers, as they believed that the system was stacked against them:

> May I be allowed to contribute on the discussion! we, the youth, have access to information, but we are disadvantaged when it comes to job criteria/requirements … and one challenge is that we are so engaged into some nonsense stuff like alcohol, stealing, womanizing or other funny activities …! We are singing a song of [wanting] the youth to be involved in economic development, but we are disadvantaged on resources or support! The youth will be empowered when our leaders are showing their interest through action. (Mark, 33, teacher)

Some young people reported that they felt that political leaders in the region were not doing enough to engage, sensitize, and empower them. They pleaded that, in most cases, the reasons why youths engaged in what could be called anti-social activities such as stealing were unemployment stress, poverty, the lack of moral support from political leaders, and hopelessness. They urged leaders to encourage positive hopes for community development among the young. Judo, a 29-year-old teacher and WhatsApp member, expressed this attitude most powerfully on the forum:

> Our leaders are the most attractive speakers, but it is not only words can transform a person but action do … For instance, you want a green scheme in our constituency … offer a land to the youth, if you want them to engage in economic affairs, support them with raw materials … that is what I mean by action! … Most of the time people that are victims of being criminals … is because of poverty and depression and hopeless life … Create awareness of hope among the youth or nation at large.

This post garnered much support, as illustrated by an enthusiastic response from Ashu, a 36-year-old community development officer:

> You are right … but the tree won't stand without roots to hold [it] … just like a child won't have manners if the parents don't support a child … morally! … I am not encouraging people to look at government only but let the government support us mentally and economically.

Clearly the young experience much anger and frustration with their local political leaders, as the latter's actions affect their lives directly. They crave for moral and educational support.

To summarize, local politics is community politics; it is intended to be long- lasting and persistent. Personal relationships constitute the foundation on which a local democracy can

be built in these regional contexts and online youth forums help to consolidate this building process, along with the political aspirations of those involved.

7.4 CONCLUSION

The findings from this study tell us that social media platforms are used by young people, politicians, non-politicians, and others in the region as sites for information sharing and debate. It is clear that the young interacted intensely on these platforms, both among themselves and with their political leaders; moreover, both parties did so well beyond working-time boundaries, which highlights their motivation to participate in social media forums. Young people and politicians alike were using their free time to access, share, and discuss topical issues in the region. This is a good sign; it reflects a growing political intimacy, forthrightness, and honesty between citizens and government representatives. The engagement with social media described in this chapter alerted the region's political leaders to the concerns of young citizens under their care and made them aware of how these young citizens would like certain challenges to be addressed.

Another major lesson to be drawn from this case study is that of the *capitalization* of digital resources and digital literacy. Young people are using Facebook and WhatsApp to offer advice to others and to ask questions for which they did not have answers, since there were many professionals online. This digital skilling or literacy acquisition on political platforms pushes us to expand the definition of local politics, making it incorporate aspects of social lifestyle, employment, community building, and trust, together with an ongoing process of building knowledge and proficiency in a range of issues well beyond normative politics at a national level.

A third important point concerns *inclusivity*. While many of the young citizens from the rural and marginalized areas did not participate directly on these platforms, it is clear that they were indirectly engaged, through text messages they received from their local chairs, or else through vouchers, calls, and other strategies that pulled them into this digital world. This forces me to reconsider what constitutes digital inclusion in light of a more specific notion of bridging the digital divide, which entails bridging the gap between traditional media and new media. One has to switch all the time between traditional media and new media in order to ensure that those who do not have access to the former get access to the latter, so that everyone benefits and acquires the same information at the same time.

The point about inclusivity has obvious implications. In a world where mobile Internet use is proliferating among young people as well as among government officials and other leaders, we need to attend to the issue of how inclusivity can be enhanced through such digital tools. Despite connectivity issues, social media are becoming a strong political sphere where young people can connect, meet and discuss, influence and motivate one another

on civic and political activities, or debate about challenges in the region, employment opportunities, and so on.

Finally, it must be said that this study has two main limitations. First, my participants were drawn only from one out of the fourteen political regions of the country; and each region has a different demographic makeup. In the future, similar studies should be designed for the exploration of the role of mobile social media – as used by the young – in regional and local politics in the other regions in Namibia. Secondly, this is a qualitative study; and qualitative ethnographies, while permitting the in-depth investigation of important aspects, block others. In this case, qualitative analysis does not allow for a full investigation of the youths' use of social media, since the researcher cannot know wherefrom exactly they are posting or commenting. Hence, to complement this study, similar research should be conducted in Namibia, using a different data collection instrument. These two limitations speak against any simple, direct generalization of the findings presented here to the entire young population of Namibia.

The next chapter will draw the general conclusions of this dissertation.
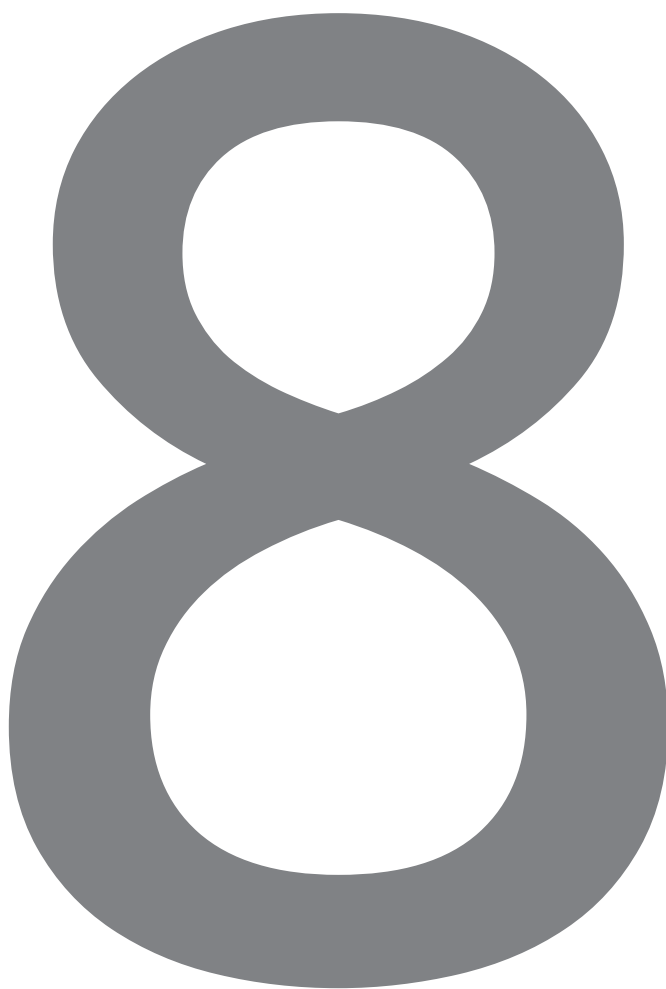
Conclusion and Implications
for Future Research

8.1 INTRODUCTION

In this dissertation I set out to study citizen engagement, politics, and digital media in Namibia. I explored how young Namibians use their mobile phones to engage in regional and local politics, trying to find out what motivates them to participate in civic and political life, what is the nature of this participation, and how they connect to political leaders and government officials in their region of residence. In this chapter I will present the general conclusions of my research, gathering them around the three questions I formulated at the outset, in chapter 1 (p. 9-10):

- RQ 1: Which young people participate and what motivates them to engage in regional and local politics?
- RQ 2: What is the nature of their political participation through mobile phones?
- RQ3: To what extent and in what ways do young people connect with the government and other stakeholders through the use of mobile phones?

8.2 CONCLUSIONS

But let me start at a very general level. Across the chapters, the conclusions I reached in my research outline four comprehensive topics of debate, which I summarize thus:

- The relations between old and new media need to be reconsidered.
- Digital politics is less about elections and more about community building.
- Social media political platforms are slowly pushing against, and transforming, the cultural hierarchies that play out in face-to-face political meetings.
- Used well, entertainment can play an important role in digital politics.

Building my arguments around these four ideas necessitated a whole investigation into how mobile telephony can be used as a political tool – and not just in Namibia but anywhere in the world, given the growing digitalization of the public sphere. I have concluded that, although network connectivity is poor in Ohangwena (the region studied here), and especially in its rural constituencies, young citizens display a growing taste for using the mobile phone as an intermediary, to communicate with their relatives, friends, or even whole villages. Citizens are so avid for the services that these devices can offer that, in order to improve their chances of getting a network, they climb trees and organize their life so as to be free for online activity after midnight.

It also became clear to me in the course of this research that there is less political engagement on the mobile phone than on community engagement platforms, although use of the mobile phone is the most widespread. This is an important element of picture; and it can take the researcher in several fertile directions. One of my aims has been to try

to find out how mobile gadgets can influence the political will of those young citizens who show no sign of being greatly motivated (if at all) to participate in politics offline, in the real world. Could they be made interested in online participation? And could that influence their overall attitude to political activity and engagement?

Further along this path, my study opens the way to future explorations of the digital divide in the global South. Despite poor network connectivity and a high rate of unemployment, most of the young people in the region own mobile phones. Just to recall, for the sake of example, some of the details presented in chapter 3: 50 (35 male and 15 female) out of the 65 youths in my semi-structured interviews have smartphones and are increasingly using them to read newspapers, listen to the radio, and bring themselves up to speed in current affairs. Young citizens are also using cheap data plans from local mobile telecommunications companies such as the Mobile Telecommunications Company (MTC). One such plan is Oka Aweh, prepaid packages that cost N$7 each and offer free calls to any national number. A package comes with 20 free minutes, 50 free text messages, 20 MB free data, and 20 MB social media data for WhatsApp; and all free units are valid for three days. Another affordable data plan from MTC is Aweh Go, which sells free calls to any national numbers for N$13 and offers 50 free minutes, 150 free text messages, 50 MB free data, and 50 MB for social media data – all free units being valid for seven days. Such data plans make it possible for citizens to access the Internet; and they are not the only ones. MTC also offers the public preloaded packages with free data for WhatsApp, Facebook, free text messages, and free calling minutes. As for the smartphones, most of the affordable ones in Ohangwena come from the Chinese and Indian shops listed in chapter 3.

Although radio is a popular medium and more than 70 percent of the population in Ohangwena owns one, it emerged from this study that young people tend not to listen to NBC Oshiwambo, which is a state radio station (see chapter 4); they prefer private radio stations such as Omulunga Radio and Ohangwena Community Radio, which have music and other entertainment programmes. On average, it is elderly citizens who listen to national or public radio. The few youths who tune in to it are predominantly interested in entertainment programmes and in politicians' announcements of employment and other youth-related opportunities. The overall conclusion of this part of my research is that the mobile phone has become an object of entertainment and leisure for young citizens rather than being used as a political tool that can connect them to their political leaders. This is why my dissertation calls for governments to reconsider the usage of this mass medium – the mobile phone – and to find how it may be possible to shift it towards stimulating citizen engagement. One way to achieve such an aim would be for the government to set up digital literacy classes for the less technologically privileged members of the society.

It is true that politicians and other officials involved with the young are genuinely attempting to communicate with them by sending them urgent messages, the latest news, and topical information (say, about drought relief distribution programmes or public

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meetings) through the NBC Oshiwambo Radio morning programme. However, given that young citizens do not pay attention to these stations, politicians and the entire regional leadership should make it a priority to instruct the population in their constituencies on the importance of listening to certain programmes on the public radio, even via mobile phones. An educational campaign should contribute to this goal; and I believe that such a campaign would fit in very well with the 081 for Everyone campaign, by which the Namibian MTC is striving to make sure that all citizens will be able to make use of their mobiles by 2020. I am also confident that the network connectivity problem that still causes trouble in Ohangwena will be resolved in the near future with the help of 081 for Everyone. Already in 2018, the MTC started erecting network towers in constituencies that had been marginalized ever since independence – that is, constituencies with limited connectivity (or even none at all).

Next, there is the matter of the hybridity of old and new media, which is of interest here because hybrid practices are reflected in regional politics and affect the participation of young people, creating a landscape of patterns specific to the region. In Ohangwena, traditional or old-style media such as newspapers and television are mainly available to urban residents. Young people who live in this region are on the whole reported to read the *Namibian* in preference to other newspapers (such as *New Era*, *Republikein*, and *Sun*), and especially the Friday edition, which they consult for vacancies, entertainment, and current affairs. Only a handful of youths indicated to me that they are in the habit of buying and reading newspapers out of some wider interest in sociopolitical developments; and these were a few among the few. The majority of young people I interviewed are using mobile phones to access radio stations and TV channels where they read or watch news; and this – rather than buying newspapers or tuning in to radio or TV sets directly – is the dominant tendency, even in spite of network coverage problems. As mentioned before, youths are so determined to use the mobile phone that they put up with extremely uncomfortable times and places when that's the only way to do it.

But poor network coverage is just one out of many constraints and challenges that young people in the communities of Ohangwena are facing every day. Others are unemployment, which has a very high rate among 15–53-year-olds – and not just in this region, but in the whole country; favouritism in relation to jobs and other opportunities for young people; cultural hierarchies and protocols, especially at community meetings, that disfavour the young and discourage their attendance. My research proved that all these factors contributed to the low levels of civic and political engagement displayed by the young.

Other major challenges that came out clearly are restricted access to proper road infrastructure and networks; the poor representation of young people at decision-making levels; general ignorance and lack of understanding, coupled with a low level of digital literacy; and an endemic lack of moral support from the region's leaders. The problem of public and political literacy, especially in relation to the new media and their effects on the

social development of the country, has been investigated in chapter 6, both among young people and among senior leaders. An important aspect of this problem – and one that keeps recurring, under many forms, in several areas of my investigation – is the digital divide, which seems to be widening within the youth class itself, namely between semi-urban and rural youths, in the absence of adequate mechanisms from political leaders to support all young people, regardless of their political affiliation. This has been discussed in chapter 4; and we have seen that political leaders are rightfully reputed to be 'sweet talkers' but to miss on implementation. In consequence, the young people in my study constantly request from them the support and assistance they need if they are to become actively invested in the socioeconomic transformation of their region. This takes us to the overarching problem of political digital literacy. Further studies are called for to determine the regional leaders' levels of competency with the mobile phone as a communication tool – especially as an intermediary between them and young citizens.

Despite connectivity issues, mobile social media are now becoming an autonomous political sphere: they create a space where young citizens can connect around civic and political activities, meet and discuss, influence and motivate one another. We are here on the terrain of what has been labelled 'affective public platforms' (Papacharissi, 2016), where citizens can connect, share messages, date, and discuss all sorts of developmental issues concerning them and their country.

Social media platforms such as the ones explored here in chapter 7 – the Ohangwena Regional Youth Forum Facebook page and the two WhatsApp groups – show that participants mainly take pictures of posts and vacancies – as advertised for example in the newspaper or at the constituencies' offices – and share them. Interestingly, some of the councillors actively share such notices of vacancies on these platforms – as well as other important messages. They also interact with other members of the group as they answer questions from the floor. It should be noted that neither all the political leaders nor all the youths in the region are on these platforms. However, those who are must be representative enough, since most of them are chairs of their respective youth clubs. This opens the question of *digital inclusiveness* and of the means to attain it in a democratic state like Namibia.

8.2.1 What Kinds of Young People Participate in Regional and Local Politics through the Mobile Phone, and What Motivates Them to Engage?

8.2.1.1 What Categories of Young People Participate in Regional and Local Politics?
The answer to this question comes from different chapters of the dissertation.

According to my research, the young people who participate in regional and local politics in Ohangwena are predominantly male and unemployed – school dropouts for the most part. The majority are from marginalized communities in rural areas; however, some of the young citizens in urban areas are also active on the political front and generally present on the public scene.

Although the youths from rural areas are the ones who face economic hardship head-on, as most of them were unemployed at the time of this research and had to walk long distances to reach nearby service centres such as constituency offices, they remain committed to the development of their country.

On the whole, these young people stay at home or hang around bars and cuca shops; but they have ample time to browse the net and connect with their fellows digitally when the network coverage is reliable. At the same time, they have developed a negative attitude towards attending meetings in person in the region, since at such meetings they feel they are neglected and not valued. A similar conclusion has been reached earlier by Mattes and Richardson (2015) and by Mudhai (2013): young people's physical presence at meetings has been declining, once the alternative to participate *digitally* opened.

This kind of conclusion has generated two contrastive ways of interpreting the phenomenon of digital politics. One school of thought takes it to be a negative development – one that encourages a passive attitude and thereby has the potential to subvert real political action. Seen in this light, digital politics has acquired the pejorative label of slacktivism. At the opposite end, other scholars claim that digitalization is a positive development because it can motivate the young, get them engaged in politics, and broaden their sociopolitical horizon – bearing in mind that these youths have long been sidelined through traditional means of political engagement (hierarchies in real-world meetings, for instance). But achieving this potential is a tall order; if digital politics is to be up to the task, all or most young people should engage in politics effectively, through their mobile phones. And this cannot happen unless we make digital literacy campaigns part of our strategies – the ones designed to ensure that all citizens, old and young alike, understand the relevance of digital debates and how these can shape up our democratic institutions.

My study reveals, further, that both smartphone users and non-smartphone users participate in equal measure and are equally present in the democratic public sphere; they all show great interest, make enquiries or ask questions of their regional councillors, and come up with suggestions for various developmental programmes. And this applies all across the board. In spite of general tendencies to fall into the groups I outlined at the beginning of this section, there is great variety among the young people I interviewed. Some are in their early careers and just started working; some have degrees and diplomas. Some live in towns, some in villages, in or out of the region, close to centres of activity or far away in the woods. But, regardless of these and other differences, they are all making the same effort to participate in the political life of the region with the help of their mobile phones.

8.2.1.2   What Motivates the Young to Participate in Regional and Local Politics?

My research has pointed out a number of factors that clearly inspire the young people to participate in regional and local politics or create motivations for them to do so. Here I am going to list these motivating factors one by one.

First, some of these factors are negative in character; and *inaccessibility* is probably the highest-ranking one among these. Poor network connectivity and inadequate radio frequencies in the region, along with difficulties in reaching regional officials (political leaders, councillors, and so on), brought youths together, prompting them to discuss how best to counteract such adversities and improve the situation in their region. It also appears that youths tend to use the mobile phone for contact with their political leaders because they cannot raise matters with them face to face. But political leaders remain elusive and difficult to get hold of even on their mobiles.

Second, the *existence*, *availability* and *proliferation* of mobile telephony is another strong motivating factor – a positive one, this time. Despite the high rate of unemployment, there is a marked increase in mobile phone ownership across the region, especially among young citizens between the ages of 15 and 35; and in my study youths in this category demonstrated great readiness to share and discuss issues of interest to them in the digital sphere. Most of the young people I interviewed are members of regional youth forums; and, although not all members attend face-to-face meetings or gatherings, those who do so update their absent fellows via text messages or via postings on social media platforms that they themselves have created, with the main aim of fostering an inclusive democratic atmosphere in the digital world.

A third major motive for young people (at least for some of them) to join regional forums and political discussions is *party ideology*. Most participants whom I interviewed were members of political parties. They declared that they joined this or that party – or, as non-members, supported it and voted for its candidates – because they were attracted to its political and social ideology.

This opens onto a new and very important topic: *political role modelling*. Youths in my research who joined various parties were usually continuing a family tradition: they had witnessed their parents acting as members of the same parties and embracing the same ideologies. This goes some way towards explaining the element of ideological attractiveness: by serving as role models, parents make the ideology feel familiar and right, and ultimately attractive enough for their offspring to adopt it. Political role modelling – an unexplored topic in media and political communication – is the kind of behaviour displayed by adult members of political parties so as to attract youths to politics and make them want to join the same political organization.

To resume, a fourth motive was *unemployment*: another negative factor, like the first. Many interviewees made it clear that they joined political groups such as youth forums in order to find employment. Being members, they can use their mobile phone to get job adverts that are shared on various social media platforms.

It became clear to me in the course of my study that young people regard voting as a constitutional obligation; this was the reason why most of them took part in the electoral process. However, I also found that some of these young people registered for elections but did not actually go to vote.

One major lesson from the case studies analysed in relation to motivation concerns the capitalization of digital resources and digital literacy. Young people learned to use Facebook and WhatsApp so as to give advice to others or to ask questions to which they themselves would not have answers, when a lot of professional expertise can be found online. Culling answers in this way, from the Internet, is a form of digital skilling and literacy, and its discovery is an important conclusion in this study.

8.2.2   What Is the Nature of Young People's Participation in Politics through Mobile Phones?

Parts of an answer to this question can be found everywhere in this dissertation. According to my findings for Ohangwena, young people participate as members in regional and constituency youth forums mainly out of a desire to sensitize fellow youths to important matters that affect their lives and subsequently to discuss these matters, find solutions, and so on. As is obvious, in regional politics there are two basic types of participation, engagement, and activity, for the young as for anyone else: online and (let's say, for brevity) offline. My findings are not alone in indicating that young people are less engaged in civic and political activities deployed in real, non-virtual space, which they associate with the elderly; they are willing instead to engage online, via mobile phones (and I'll expand on this very soon). On the other hand, when they do engage in political activities *in praesentia*, in the physical world, something very interesting happens. In this region, young members sometimes perform dramas that feature messages of warning – say, songs about teenage pregnancy, the effects of alcohol and drug abuse at school or during social functions (e.g. the national heroes' day, or the international youth day). The main goal of dramatic activities of this kind is to attract and educate other youths. Other activities, for example public debates, are typically dedicated to development in the constituency.

Young people's online activities are extremely varied; the spectrum ranges from simple phone conversations on the mobile to sophisticated posts on social media pages created by the youths themselves. One key finding of my research is that young people spend their leisure time in such activities and share skills digitally in order to make significant contributions. This kind of participatory approach turns out to be working very well with young citizens, despite the digital divide that cripples it.

Youth forums also served as a source of political platforms that dialogue and network for employment and political identity. These platforms re-energize young people and lift their morale, as, to them, politics is all about sociopolitical issues such as empowerment, teenage pregnancy, HIV/AIDs, alcohol and drugs abuse, and mobilization.

All this leads to the conclusion that the mobile phone emerged as the main communication tool, and one that can nurture direct democracy. All across the board – from its use in direct calls and messages to friends, relatives, and political leaders to its role in promoting social media platforms such as Facebook – the mobile phone proved itself

capable of increasing young people's involvement in politics, in social causes, and in civic activities; and it creates a new public sphere for inclusive digital democracy.

Another major conclusion of my dissertation is that, to young people in Ohangwena, politics is not primarily a party affair and does not necessarily have to do with parties but is mainly about *survival*, *employment*, *identities*, and *youth empowerment* – which is important because these are the future leaders of the country. Nevertheless, as already mentioned, young people do take it to be their constitutional obligation to play their part in electoral processes and choose the leaders they judge fit, or to belong to the political party whose ideology matches their own aspirations and understanding of social development.

This corroborates my view, expressed several times throughout this dissertation, that young people today are not politically inactive, uninterested, and apathetic about politics, as they are often portrayed, but are engaged in a different manner from the one we are familiar with from the past. As daily users of the Internet, they prefer to show their interest and commitment by joining online political groups. All they need is a platform that should be free from interference from other political elements. And the findings presented in this dissertation reveal that, together, regional and constituency youth forums have already created such a platform: a public sphere for the local community that includes a space for youths and other disadvantaged groups to discuss solutions to local socioeconomic problems.

It is important that the mobile phone gave some youths access to social media platforms of the kind that nurture digital democracy. But one should also bear in mind that young people in Namibia are on the whole rather sceptical of what is posted on social media; hence they tend to prefer mobile communication by phone. As we have seen, they use their mobile phones mainly to communicate with their peers in the region; they do this through direct calls and text messages and, when the cost of talking and texting is prohibitive, they make sacrifices to ensure that their phones are recharged. This mode of relating to fellow citizens and political leaders in the community paves the way for direct democracy.

Finally, all the elements in this complex picture tell us that the theoretical relationship between political participation, civic engagement, and new media use should be contextualized to the unique profile of the region, with its specific activities, groups, and individuals.

8.2.3 To What Extent Are Young People Connecting with the Government and Other Stakeholders on Mobile Phones?

This question is attended to throughout chapter 6 as well as in parts of chapter 7 (and others). As we have seen, although the mobile phone numbers of regional politicians were made available publicly, young people still found it difficult to talk to these individuals: their calls were either not answered or answered by generally unhelpful assistants. The politicians themselves were often in meetings. Relatedly, many young people felt that most of their

councillors tended to make themselves readily available to them only during their election campaign.

Public town-hall meetings and mobile social media such as Facebook and WhatsApp turned out to be the most widely used platforms that enabled both citizens and politicians to interact and engage with each other without any geographical difficulties. Public town-hall meetings were attended by a disproportionately low number of young people; as a result, both they and the politicians created political outreach programmes with entertainment in the form of songs, drama, and music in their political. This move was successful and accomplished its purpose of attracting more young people to these events.

Social media platforms are used by young people, politicians, and other residents of Ohangwena as information-sharing and debating sites. Here, on these platforms, both youths and political leaders can be seen to interact with each other without any concern for the time they spend doing it (compare also the results in Resnick & Casale, 2014). This is good sign: it indicates a level of political intimacy between citizens and their government representatives. Also, thanks to this kind of interaction, the political leadership gets to know what concerns the young people have and how they would like certain challenges to be addressed. Again, all this is part of constructing a direct democracy.

Besides, the evidence shows that the discussions take place mostly after working hours or during weekends. This means that both young people and politicians use their free time to share and discuss topical regional issues. It also means that private time (or leisure) is used constructively by both parties, for the benefit of the region, to ensure that there change and growth. This could take us to the area of politicization of leisure (but that is a subject for another study).

Namibia is a young democracy in a climate where the global conversation has shifted towards arguing that social media are a real threat to democracy. Countries went to war, or are not at peace, largely as a result of how their citizens were using social media. If not properly handled, social media can indeed wreck a democracy. Consequently, one of my aims in this dissertation has been to propose ways to save our democracy from any such threat – for example though digital literacy and sensitization campaigns, or through amendments to policies such as the communication act of 2009.

8.3   POLICY IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings from this study have implications for various policies, especially the ones related to the practice of inclusive democracy, which is a major cause across the country. The government of the Republic of Namibia encourages and promotes inclusive democracy through a policy of decentralization; the plan is that citizens should be fully engaged, at grassroots level, in policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation. However, the fact

that regional councillors – who deal with their communities, including the young people – are reportedly using mainly mainstream channels of communication and venues such as public community meetings, village meetings, and constituency meetings is likely to result in the *exclusion* rather than inclusion of young citizens, because their attendance to such meetings is poor, as is their rate of use of mainstream traditional media. Hence young citizens will not have their say in debates that could stimulate growth in their region and improve their own lives. What is more, the findings discussed here detail how youths feel less engaged in regional politics as a result of the perceived systematic unavailability of their political representatives, who never answer their mobile phones (although they promised they would).

The present study recommends that entertainment activities should be incorporated into various political engagement activities; the aim would be to enhance participatory democracy, attract larger numbers of young people, and promote inclusiveness. It also recommends that the regional political leadership and young people forums (or constituency forums) should work together to organize information sessions designed to create awareness and explain the importance of these 'offline', real-world political networks for the youth. At present youth forums seem not to have much influence on political systems and processes; but the engagement of young people, be it formal or informal, can be understood as political participation and would be beneficial to a vivid and resilient democracy. Finally, this study recommends that political education programmes targeting young people should be strengthened and multiplied.

My research has limitations: it was conducted in just one out of the fourteen political regions of Namibia. Besides, I spent only seven months in the field; and I used participant ethnographic observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions to collect my data for this research. I suggest that future research into the relation between the mobile phone and young people's participation in politics should cover all the regions of the country and be carried out over a longer period. It would be interesting to compare the results.

Owing to their easy portability and to the access they give to social media and the Internet, mobile phones are very popular among young people; for example, in spite of network and other difficulties, youths prefer accessing even mainstream media through their mobile phones rather than directly. This puts the mobile phone right at the centre of any research on the political activity of the young generation. My study aims to contribute to the current debate on mobile phones, young people, and participation in regional politics in the global South. The background ingredient most relevant to my research is the fact that, while there is a high proliferation of mobile phones and social media platforms, various researchers are currently concerned with the young people's declining interest in regional politics and low levels of participation in any political activity.

8

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APPENDICES

Appendices

Appendix A

PERMISSION LETTER TO THE REGIONAL COUNCIL

**Erasmus School of
History, Culture and
Communication**

To whom it may concern

Date
July 5, 2016

Subject
Introductory Letter for Sadrag Panduleni
Shihomeka

Our reference
160705_SJ/PA/EM

Your reference

Page
1/1

Appendix

Department
Media & Communication

Visiting address
Burgemeester Oudlaan 50
Van der Goot Building
M8-04

Postal address
PO Box 1738
3000 DR Rotterdam
The Netherlands

T +31 10 408 2443
E s.janssen@eshcc.eur.nl
W www.eshcc.eur.nl/english/media

To whom it may concern,

I am writing to request your assistance in a research project being undertaken as part of a PhD degree in Media and Communication by Sadrag Panduleni Shihomeka, a PhD student (number 58703ssh) of ours at the Erasmus School of History, Culture, and Communication, Department of Media and Communication, at Erasmus University of Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

His PhD Dissertation is titled: *'Citizen Engagement: Politics and Digital Media in Namibia'*. In particular we would appreciate your assistance for him to collect a limited amount of information on how does the youth use social media to engage in regional and local politics in Namibia. We would be grateful, therefore, if you could give him permission to do interviews with youth and other local and regional stakeholders, as well as to have two Focus Group Discussions with Representative Youth from the Regional Youth forum on issues related to his area of study.

He will need to: 1. Participate in all the Meetings of the Regional Youth Forums in July – August 2016; 2. Conduct semi-structured interviews with youth from the Forum 3. Conduct two Focus Group Discussions with selected youth from the Forum and NGOs in the region; 4. Do semi-structured interviews with the politicians and other stakeholders like Community Based organizations, informal NGOs, activists etc.

We must stress that the data collected will not identify the individuals personally except where permission is sought by the researcher. Further, the findings will be used strictly for academic purposes only. If you would like to discuss this further, please do not hesitate to email us. Our email addresses are: arora@eshcc.eur.nl and janssen@eshcc.eur.nl.

Your assistance is greatly appreciated

Yours sincerely,

_____
Prof. dr. Susanne Janssen
Doctoral Promoter

_____
Dr. Payal Arora
Doctoral Daily supervisor

Erasmus University Rotterdam

Appendix B

PERMISSION LETTER FROM THE REGIONAL COUNCIL

OHANGWENA REGIONAL COUNCIL

TEL. 065 264300
FAX: 065 263033

Private Bag 88011
Eenhana

Enq: FH Shilongo

INTERNAL MEMORANDUM

TO: **ALL REGIONAL COUNCILORS**

FROM: **ACTING CHIEFEGIONAL OFFICER**
       OHANGWENA REGIONAL COUNCIL

Date: 07 July 2016

RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH - SADRAG P. SHIHOMEKA

This memo serves to bring to the attention of all Regional Councilors that Mr. Sadrag Panduleni Shihomeka ID 79110100172, a PhD student (number 58703ssh) in Media and Communication at Erasmus University Rotterdam will be conducting his PhD Research in some of our Constituencies, assisted by Mr. Malakia Nghuumbwa.

His Research titled: **Citizen Engagement: Political and Digital Media in Namibia** will be conducted with the youths of Oshikunde, Omudaungilo, Ondobe and Eenhana Constituencies between July and August 2016. He will also be organizing Focus Group Discussions with some Regional Councilors yet to be selected.

Please render him all the necessary support.

Regards,

All Official correspondences must be address to the Acting Chief Regional Officer.

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Appendix C

GUIDE FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS WITH REPRESENTATIVE YOUTHS FROM OHANGWENA

Structure of the interview

The interview contains two main kinds of questions, which are, respectively, primary and secondary within the topic. Primary questions are introduced as numbered items and should be addressed at some point during the interview. Sometimes a topic can consist of a cluster of primary questions. Secondary or follow-up questions are introduced as bullet subpoints. They help to guide the discussion and, later, the analysis according to the topic where they belong, but they are not mandatory; other questions may arise and replace them as the interview progresses. This general structure and the corresponding notation apply in fact to all types of interviews.

The semi-structured interviews will be conducted face to face and will last between 30 minutes and one hour. They will be digitally recorded. They will also have the following rubrics:

Name of researcher:

Name of interviewee:

Date and time of the interview:

Brief presentation of the content, scope, and aims of the interview:

I am Sadrag Panduleni Shihomeka, a PhD candidate in politics and digital media at Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands and I am currently conducting research for a study with the title 'Citizen Engagement: Politics and Digital Media in Namibia', for the completion of my doctoral degree. The main research question that guides my dissertation is: 'How does the youth engage in politics through social media in Namibia?' As part of this research, I will be asking each participant questions on the following topics:

- the participant's age – how the participant is situated in the larger age group selected for this study (which is comprised between 18 and 35 years);
- relevant characteristics of the participant (gender, education, employment history, present situation);
- the nature and motives of the participant's engagement (or lack thereof) in regional and local politics, his or her interests and expectations from it;
- the situations and times when the participant is using his or her mobile phone for activities related to regional and local politics;
- the extent to which the participant is connecting with the government and other stakeholders in Ohangwena via a mobile phone.

The results of the study will inform both policymakers and decision makers (and implementers) as to how youths engage in politics by using their mobile phones.

I am asking you to participate actively in this discussion, which will take place soon. Remember, there is no right or wrong answer to my questions; we are just trying to explore ideas on how best the youths can use mobile phones as a tool to engage in regional and local politics.

Kindly note that the information you supply here will be treated in the strictest confidence and will be used only for the purposes of this study. When you do not understand something, feel free to ask questions yourself, so that I can clarify. Also, please note that this is a semi-structured interview, hence you should feel free to interact with me. You have the right to withdraw from this interview at any point, should you deem that to be necessary.

Part A: Biographical/demographic data (socioeconomic characteristics)
1. Please tell me about yourself (your age, gender, religion, political affiliation, ethnic group, educational background, constituency)

Part B: Nature and reason of participant's engagement in politics
2. Are you a member of any political party? If yes, which one and why of that party? If no, why?
   Do you occasionally visit the Facebook page for that party? Are you happy with the comments or posts on that party Facebook page?
3. Approximately how much time (minutes/hours) a day do you spend on the Internet in your spare time?
4. Do you have a Facebook account? If so, why did you choose to have that account? If not, why?
   What other social media sites do you have accounts on, and why?
5. How do you use Facebook, and when?
6. Do you discuss political issues on Facebook? Probe:
   Which issues and why?
7. Who or what influences your decision to discuss political issues on Facebook?
8. What are the socioeconomic and political challenges facing Namibian youths when they try to go online or use Facebook (and other social media) in order to participate in local politics?
9. As a youth living in this region, do you think that social media increase young people's chances to communicate, interact, and share information with government officials and other senior political figures in the region, or that they rather decrease such chances?
10. What do you think the government needs to do so that more youths start using digital media to discuss public matters? How can it ensure that youths get access to their political leaders any time they need?

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11. *Accessibility*   Please describe the tools that you are using to access social media to engage in politics. Who owns them? Probe:
    - the tools belong to the user;
    - the community library;
    - an Internet café;
    - the place of work or the school.

12. *Digital literacy*   Please state whether in your view digital literacy is needed for youth engagement in politics. Give reasons for your response.
    The topics to be covered will probably include technical know-how; sending and receiving; membership of social media groups; online communities; and awareness of one's rights.

13. *Digital literacy*   As a youth of this region, what type of education and awareness programs do you think you need in order to become active in the virtual (digital) world?

14. *Political curiosity*   When you are online, what political activities do you engage in? Are they the kind that enables you to be an active citizen, digitally and otherwise?

15. *Political curiosity*   Are you a member of any online youth group? If so, which one and why? If not, why not?
    Which online youth group would you join if you were online now?

16. *Political curiosity*   Tell me whether you ever took part or thought of taking part in online protests and demonstrations. If you did, could you explain when and why?

17. *Political curiosity*   Did you attend online group meetings or forums? If so, which ones and why? If not, did you have a reason not to?

18. *Political curiosity*   Do you have trust in social media discussions? If yes, why? If not, why?

19. *Interest in public affairs*   In what ways do you think social media such as Facebook increase (or decrease) your chances, as a youth, to engage in public discussions concerning your region, your constituency, or your village?

20. *Interest in public affairs*   Are you a member of any online community development committee (CDCs)? If you are not a member, why? And, if you are, did you decide to become a member and what type of community issues do you normally discuss online?

21. *Interest in public affairs*   Did you ever attend an online CDCs meeting? If yes, why? If no, why not? Please give me your views on online meetings.

22. *Interest in public affairs*   Have you ever participated in, or organised, an online public meeting that enables youths like yourself to participate freely in public matters that concern communities in their villages and constituencies, or in the entire region? To your knowledge, have fellow youths in your constituency participated in such meetings?

23. *Interest in public affairs*   Please share with me the public issues that you debated online. What were your reasons for picking them up?
24. *Motives/interests*   What do you think motivates the youth to participate in online activities more actively than in activities on the ground, or in preference to participating in the latter?
25. *Motives/interests*   In what ways do you think youths can use their leisure time if they want to engage digitally in political debates?
26. *Motives/interests*   According to some studies, more and more youths around the world are treating new digital media such as Facebook, Twitter, mobile phones as social avenues for leisure or entertainment. As a youth, do you agree or disagree with this view? What are the leisure and entertainment activities that you engage in on these social media?

Part C: General questions

27. How do social and cultural factors such as class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, political affiliation, and location affect youth participation in politics – especially the kind of participation that is mediated by Facebook and similar social media?
28. What role do you think social media sites such as Facebook has on youths' participation in the political and public life of their regions and villages?
29. What factors do you think have an influence on whether young people engage online in regional and local matters?
    Topics to be represented here probably include money, time, knowledge, information, and political infrastructures such as community meeting halls.

Part D: Closure

30. Is there anything else you wanted to discuss that I haven't covered today about social media and citizen engagement?
    Do you have any suggestions or comments? Can I contact you again with any follow up questions?

I will send you the text of this interview after the transcription is completed. I will keep you informed if I choose to publish any of the material gathered today. I will also send you an executive summary of my dissertation once it's published next year, as well as a URL for it when it's made available online.

    The interview is now concluded. I would like to thank you all for agreeing to meet me and to provide me with valuable information for my research project.

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Appendix D

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION OF REGIONAL YOUTH FORUMS' MEETINGS

Main parameters, criteria, and questions that guided and structured the observations:

1. attendance (gender; participation level in terms of gender, ethnic group, political affiliation);
2. engagement (level, nature of political activism);
3. type of technology used at the meeting;
4.   environment (how conducive to the use of social media);
5. use of mobile phones by youths during meetings (are they listening? are there youths that are online during meetings of the youth forum? what can be done to make it possible for such meetings to accommodate online participation too, in the near future?)

Appendix E

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE WITH POLITICAL LEADERS AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS (REGIONAL COUNCILLORS)

Introduction

I am Sadrag Panduleni Shihomeka, a PhD candidate in politics and digital media at Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands and I am currently conducting research for a study with the title 'Citizen Engagement: Politics and Digital Media in Namibia', for the completion of my doctoral degree. The main research question that guides my dissertation is: 'How does the youth engage in politics through social media in Namibia?' I am asking you to participate actively in this discussion, which will take place soon. Remember, there is no right or wrong answer to my questions; we are just trying to explore ideas on how best the youths can use mobile phones as a tool to engage in regional and local politics.

Kindly note that the information you supply here will be treated in the strictest confidence and will be used only for the purposes of this study. When you do not understand something, feel free to ask questions yourself, so that I can clarify. You have the right to withdraw from this interview at any point, should you deem that to be necessary.

Questions

1. I would like to start by asking the honourable councillor to introduce himself just by saying his name and telling us how long he has been a regional councillor for; then we would like to hear him talk to us a bit about the experience of being a councillor and tell us something he likes about it.

2. Please share with me the level of young people's participation in community issues that affect them. How do you connect and communicate with them? Do you find social media platforms such as Facebook useful when you attempt to communicate with your fellow councillors and with members of the community?

3. Now please share with me your understanding of the terms 'political participation' and 'political engagement'. How would you define them?

4. What motivates you, as a councillor, to get online? What experiences did you have? Above all, what is your view of new media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and the like? Do they help your political outreach to young people or not? Why?

5. How do you respond to online protests on social issues that you are advocating (if you experienced any)?
   Give examples of online positive or negative experience with the citizens

6. Some research studies indicate that young people look at contemporary politicians as different from older ones, who were there to fulfil their mandates; and they feel

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excluded, which alienates them from politics. How would you comment on this statement? Would you agree with it? Could you support your view with examples from your constituency?

7. Suppose you have a few minutes to explain to the young the role of mobile phone as a tool of political engagement (we are still talking of politics at the regional and local level). What would you say to them?

8. What, in your view, are the socioeconomic and political challenges that your region is facing when adopting the policy of carrying out political discussions with young people online? What strategies do you think need to be developed to overcome these challenges?
   Topics to be covered here: digital illiteracy; skills barriers; infrastructure; linguistic factors; cultural factors; fixed broadband issues

9. Suppose that you were in charge of this region and could make one change that would encourage young people to participate in regional and local politics digitally, by using their mobile phones. What would you do? And how?

10. Do you think the mobile phone plays a key role in facilitating the interactive relationship between young citizens and political representatives? If so, in what way?
    Probing questions: Do councillors have Facebook pages? Does the region or the constituency have a Facebook page? Is there a regional council forum Facebook page? How active is it?

11. Do you have any suggestions or comments? Can I contact you again with any follow up questions?

Thank you very much for taking part in this discussion. I am holding a number of interviews with your fellow Regional Councillors like this one and then will be feeding back my findings to people who live and work in this region by the end of the year.

Appendix F

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION WITH REPRESENTATIVE YOUTHS FROM THE OHANGWENA REGIONAL YOUTH FORUM

Introduction

I am Sadrag Panduleni Shihomeka, a PhD candidate in politics and digital media at Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands and I am currently conducting research for a study with the title 'Citizen Engagement: Politics and Digital Media in Namibia', for the completion of my doctoral degree. The main research question that guides my dissertation is: 'How does the youth engage in politics through social media in Namibia?' I am asking you to participate actively in this discussion, which will take place soon. Remember, there is no right or wrong answer to my questions; we are just trying to explore ideas on how best the youths can use mobile phones as a tool to engage in regional and local politics.

Kindly note that the information you supply here will be treated in the strictest confidence and will be used only for the purposes of this study. When you do not understand something, feel free to ask questions yourself, so that I can clarify. Also, please note that this is a focus group interview, hence you should feel free to interact with your classmates. You have the right to withdraw from this interview at any point, should you deem that to be necessary.

Instructions: format and preliminaries

I will open the floor to a discussion in which you can interact with your colleagues. Please make full use of this opportunity.

We should allow others to state their points freely.

If there is anything you wish me to clarify, please ask me now, by way of preliminaries; otherwise I'll assume that you are ready and we can start rightaway.

The questions

1. *Researcher*: Please share with me your understanding of the following two terms: 'political participation' and 'political engagement'. What do they mean to you?
   Respondent:
2. *Researcher*: Do citizens in your constituencies or region, especially the young ones, engage in regional and local governance politics – in decision-making processes, for instance – during their leisure hours? If so, how do they do it? Are they using social media for this purpose?
   What effects does this type of engagement have on their political processes?
3. *Researcher*: Please explain to me what, in your view, makes some young citizens

participate in politics, while others don't.
Respondent:

4. *Researcher*: What do you think the government needs to do to ensure that youths use mobile phones effectively to engage in local politics?
    Respondent:

5. *Researcher*: Do you think that youths in your area are preponderantly offline or preponderantly online? Please state the reasons why you think so.
    Respondent:

6. *Researcher*: Some research studies reached the conclusion that young people consider contemporary politicians to be different from older politicians, who were there in order to fulfil their mandates; young people feel excluded, and hence politics has a disengaging, distancing effect on them. Do you agree or do you disagree with this conclusion? Please offer a few examples from your constituency or region.
    Respondent:

7. Researcher: What factors do you think contribute to the high or low level of engagement in politics among the youths, via mobile phone?
    Respondent:

8. *Researcher*: To what extent, would you say, does the playful use of new digital media technologies by citizens, especially young ones, increase (or maybe decrease?) active engagement in regional and local governance politics and in decision-making processes?
    Respondent:

9. *Researcher*: Suppose you have a few minutes to make young people aware of the importance of using the social media as a tool of political engagement (we are still talking of politics at the regional and local level). What would you say to them?
    Respondent:

10. *Researcher*: What, in your view, are the socioeconomic and political challenges that your region is facing when adopting the policy of carrying out political discussions with the youths online? What strategies do you think need to be developed to overcome these challenges?
    Topics to be covered here: digital illiteracy; skills barriers; infrastructure; linguistic factors; cultural factors; fixed broadband issues.
    Respondent:

11. *Researcher*: Suppose that you were in charge of this region and could make one change that would encourage young people to participate in regional and local politics digitally, through Facebook. What would that change be? And how would you implement it?
    Respondent:

12. *Researcher*: What influence do you think social media sites such as Facebook have on youth political participation in public affairs concerning their region, constituency, or village?
    Respondent:

13. *Researcher*: What are the challenges that hinder young Namibians' usage of social media as a political engagement tool?
    Respondent:

14. *Researcher*: Do you think social media play a key role in facilitating the interactive relationship between young citizens and political representatives? If so, in what way?
    Probing questions: Do councillors have social media pages? Does the region or the constituency has a Facebook page? Is there a regional youth forum Facebook page? If so, how active is it?

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Appendix G

LIST OF THE YOUNG PEOPLE INTERVIEWED

Pseudonym	Occupation	Age	Gender	Employment	Membership of/ function in youth forum	Constituency
Moses	none	19	male	unemployed	member	Okongo
Eliaser	none	30	male	unemployed	member	Ondobe
Mart	police officer	31	male	employed	member	Engela
Jus	teacher	29	male	employed	member	Epembe
Ag	nurse	36	male	employed	member	Ondobe
Vesa	none	31	female	unemployed	member	Oshikango
Linga	entrepreneur	30	female	self-employed	member	Omundaungilo
Rega	pastor	29	male	employed	member	Omundaungilo
Mary	shop owner	31	female	employed	member	Ondobe
Lyd	teacher	35	female	employed	member	Ondobe
Lameck	none	26	male	unemployed	member	Ondobe
Gadana	entrepreneur	26	male	self-employed	member	Ondobe
Kamilo	none	18	male	unemployed	member	Ondobe
Simon	youth officer	24	male	employed	member	Ondobe
Edie	none	23	female	unemployed	member	Ondobe
Ndapu	none	20	female	unemployed	member	Ondobe
Anna	none	26	female	unemployed	member	Epembe
Lahya	Shop assitant	29	female	employed	member	Epembe
Ndeshi	none	25	female	unemployed	member	Epembe
Paulus	none	27	male	unemployed	member	Oshikunde
Tuhafeni	none	25	male	unemployed	member	Oshikunde
Ileka	none	25	male	unemployed	member	Oshikunde
Matias	none	24	male	unemployed	member	Oshikunde
Krista	none	20	male	unemployed	member	Oshikunde
Jack	none	34	male	unemployed	member	Ohangwena
Ndam	teacher	26	female	employed	member	Ohangwena
Sela	administrator	35	male	employed	member	Ohangwena
Martha	security guard	33	female	employed	member	Oshikango
Tim	none	35	male	unemployed	member	Oshikango
Emmy	none	34	female	unemployed	member	Oshikango
Sela	none	23	male	unemployed	member	Oshikango
Wilhem	volunteer at a community garden	28	male	unemployed	member	Oshikango
Malakia	teacher	32	male	employed	member	Omulonga

Pseudonym	Occupation	Age	Gender	Employment	Membership of/ function in youth forum	Constituency
John	none	32	male	self-employed	member	Omulonga
Caro	car wash attendant	24	female	employed	member, vice-chair	Omulonga
Gabs	none	24	male	unemployed	member	Omulonga
Sed	none	24	female	unemployed	member	Eenhana
Claudia	pastor	25	female	employed	member	Oshikunde
Loide	teacher	35	female	employed	member	Omulonga
Kama	banker	33	female	employed	member	Omulonga
Fessy	politician	50	male	employed	member	Engela
Valo	teacher	27	male	employed	member	Okongo
Alferedo	teacher	30	male	employed	member	Ondobe
Nalo	none	20	female	unemployed	member	Ondobe
Hendrine	none	29	female	unemployed	member	Ondobe
Job	labourer	20	male	employed	member	Ondobe
Tatuu	police officer	29	male	employed	member	Oshikunde
Zulu	mentor and HIV/ AIDS specialist	36	Male	employed	member	Omundaungilo
Esta	youth officer	27	female	employed	member	Omundaungilo
Sig	none	19	male	self-employed	member	Omundaingilo
Mark	teacher	33	male	employed	member	Omundaungilo
Judo	teacher	29	male	employed	member	Ondobe
Ashu	community development officer	36	male	employed	member	Oshikunde
Peter	school principal	36	male	employed	member	Epembe
Sigo	none	31	male	unemployed	member	Eenhana
Indila	none	27	female	unemployed	member	Eenhana
Heys	none	25	male	unemployed	member	Oshikunde
Imms	teacher	39	male	employed	member	Eenhana
mane	none	28	male	unemployed	member	Ondobe
Lazy	head of depart- ment at a school	32	male	employed	member	Oshikunde
Tangi	none	25	male	unemployed	member	Ohangwena
Henock	teacher	37	male	employed	member	Oshikango
Leo	school principal	31	male	employed	member	Ohangwena
sack	none	22	male	unemployed	member	Okongo
Henrich	teacher	26	male	employed	member	Epembe

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Appendix H

LIST OF THE REGIONAL AND LOCAL AUTHORITY COUNCILLORS INTERVIEWED

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Constituency
Councilor 1	N/A	male	Constituency A
Councilor 2	N/A	male	Constituency B
Councilor 3	N/A	male	Constituency C
Councilor 4	N/A	male	Constituency D
Councilor 5	N/A	male	Constituency D
Councilor 6	N/A	male	Constituency E

Summary

In recent years, several studies indicated that there is a downward trend in youth participation in politics and civic activities, in both the global South and the global North. Most of these studies were conducted in the West – only a few in the global South; and not all their authors are agreed on the subject of youth participation. Yet the general view that emerges is that the majority of young people are not taking part in national elections and other civic activities, a situation often characterized as pathetic disengagement from political life. There are also reports that, in various countries, quite a large number of youths are not members of any political parties.

Namibia is no exception to this trend or to the corresponding claims. But an increase in mobile phone subscriptions in this country is perceived as a possible game changer: this gadget could switch on the right buttons for sparking an interest in political participation and civic engagement among the youth. This is the main idea to which the present study is dedicated.

Most governments in Africa have signed the Africa Youth Charter, and one of the main goals of this framework is precisely to increase youth participation in politics as well as in civil, collective–communitarian, and non-political activities by the year 2020. This emphasis is due to the worrisome nature of the decline in young people's interest in such activities and of their increasing withdrawal from the political scene. At the same time negative reports have surfaced about engagement practices among leaders and politicians at regional and local level in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in Namibia. These people are accused of not making any effort to involve their citizens in public debates or to attract them to political activities and community projects. Citizens have complained that their government representatives do not make themselves accessible and are never there to listen to their needs and aspirations – needs and aspirations, that is, of members of communities under these politicians' jurisdiction. Feelings and complaints like these prevail in spite of the government's efforts to build regional councillors' offices in all the constituencies around the country and to provide both political leaders and members of the general population with mobile phones, phone allowances, Internet connectivity, and, for the leaders, personal cars for reaching their communities regardless of the geographic location of the villages.

And, indeed, it is not yet known whether young people and political leaders really use these and other facilities provided by the government in order to interact and strengthen inclusive democracy. Hence the inspiration and leading idea of this research: my primary aim was simply to explore how the members of the Ohangwena Regional Youth Forum use their mobile phones and how much of that usage revolves around politics. Do they use their mobiles to engage in regional and local politics? I was seeking answers to the following research questions:

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RQ1   Which young people participate and what motivates them to engage in local politics using mobile phones?

RQ2   What is the nature of youth participation in politics through mobile phones?

RQ3   To what extent do young people connect with the government and other stakeholders through the use of their mobile phones?

I adopted an ethnographic qualitative research method to explore the attitudes, perceptions, feelings, and experiences of youths and political leaders (who participated in my study) towards the use of the mobile phone as a tool for participation and engagement in regional and local politics. Data were collected through participant observations obtained from youth forum meetings; through 65 semi-structured interviews carried out with selected participants (45 male and 20 female) from regional youth and constituency forums; through another six semi-structured interviews conducted with the regional councillors (regional politicians); through a content analysis of seven Facebook pages and two WhatsApp groups; and through two focus group discussions with the regional youth forum executive members in the Ohangwena region.

The findings show that poor network connectivity and poor radio frequencies in some of the constituencies, a high rate of unemployment among the youths in the region, unfriendly staff members at constituencies' offices, and difficulties in accessing or talking to political representatives in the region were the main factors that motivated the youths in my study to use their mobile phones to discuss issues, including political and civic ones, that deeply affected their lives. A key concern that this research unveiled is that, although most political leaders made their mobile phone numbers known to the public and encouraged citizens to contact them, almost invariably they could not be reached, and their mobiles were permanently answered by unfriendly assistants. So young people still found it difficult, if not impossible, to talk directly to these politicians; moreover, they felt that most councillors tended to make themselves available only during election and campaign times – which clearly sends the wrong message.

My findings further highlight that youths generally prefer online platforms to real-life, physical situations of political participation and engagement – meeting spaces that are currently used by their political representatives. Most of the youths who participate (online or not) in political networks such as youth forums are school dropouts, youths who recently completed a university degree and are at an early stage in their career, and unemployed youths from various constituencies and villages. Youth forums serve as network political platforms for employment, for finding one's political identity, for dialoguing, for getting re-energized and boosting one's morale; and all this demonstrates that, for young people, politics is a complex matter. Apart from things clearly earmarked as 'political', it is also about social and sociopolitical issues such as unempowerment, teenage pregnancy, HIV/AIDs, alcohol and drug abuse, and mobilization. In this context, in my study at least, the

mobile phone emerged as the main communication tool for sharing, making direct calls, and sending messages to friends, peers, and relatives.

According to the results of this research, although public radio remains popular, private and community radio stations have overtaken public ones, thanks to political news and programmes on mobiles. For rural and unemployed youths, the main factors that inhibit the use of mobile phones for catching radio programmes are access, availability, signals, and radio frequencies. Despite these obstacles, mobile media emerged as a preferred virtual platform for online political activity among the youth – not just in connection with the radio, but in general. Youths are less engaged in civic and political activities that unfold offline, in the physical world, because they view them as the predilect terrain of older generations. They are instead much more willing to be engaged online.

In an effort to practise inclusive democracy, some of the youths and political leaders at regional and local authority levels created WhatsApp groups and Facebook pages for their respective constituencies. These were designed as virtual platforms for engagement in public debates and political communication, in addition to the radio, mobile phone texting, and public or community meetings. However, the modest level of digital and social media literacy among community members inhibits the effective use of these platforms by both leaders and community members.

At the same time public town-hall meetings have emerged – alongside mobile social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp – as the most widely used platforms of engagement that enabled citizens in all age groups to interact with politicians. But youth participation in such meetings remains pitifully low. In order to encourage it and raise the number of youths, both politicians and the few youths who usually turn up for these events started to integrate entertainment in the form of songs, drama and music in their political outreach programmes. And indeed, in this way they attracted more youths to public town-hall meetings. The attempt has been a success. Therefore this study recommends that entertainment be strengthened as a component of political engagement activities, for the sake of enhancing participatory democracy and digital inclusiveness.

My respondents indicated conclusively that, despite obstacles such as the poor network coverage in their part of the country, the high rate of unemployment among the young, and the absence of relevant infrastructure in rural areas, all youths, urban and rural alike, strongly believe that mobile social media created a virtual public sphere in which they can meet in order to discuss, strategize, and advise one another on issues that affect them deeply and immediately, and that the existence of such a sphere tends to trigger their interest and participation in politics, both regionally and locally.

Lastly, my findings show that both youths and political leaders use social media for digital skilling and literacy; for leisure and entertainment as well as for engagement (and sometimes these goals and activities merge into one); for interaction with an affective public; and for the promotion of ideals, beliefs, and models, including political ones related

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to direct and indirect digital democracy. And it bears repeating that all this takes place despite network connectivity challenges and pervasive unemployment among the young.

On the basis of the material presented and analysed in this dissertation, I conclude that the use of mobile phones and, relatedly, of social media platforms such as Facebook has a very high potential for increasing youth participation in politics and in civic activities, as it creates a new public sphere for inclusive digital democracy. But there is a caveat: in a digitized society, the uncontrolled and unregulated use of social media can engender practices that, in turn, give birth to an exclusive democracy. We should do our best to prevent this and to mobilize our moral categories, judgement, and self-pride in the pursuit of a democracy for all.

Finally, it should be mentioned here that my study revisits the old media versus new media debate by suggesting how novel forms that emerge in the neglected context of rural Namibia can broaden our understanding of the nature of media hybridity and challenge our assumptions about participatory democracy.

Samenvatting

De afgelopen jaren hebben verschillende studies aangegeven dat er een dalende trend is in de betrokkenheid van jongeren bij de politiek en maatschappelijke activiteiten, zowel in het zuiden als in het noorden van de wereld. De meeste van deze studies zijn in het westen verricht – slechts een handvol in het zuiden van de wereld – en niet alle auteurs zijn het eens over het onderwerp van jongerenparticipatie. Het algemene beeld dat is ontstaan is dat de meeste jongeren niet aan landelijke verkiezingen en andere maatschappelijke activiteiten deelnemen, een situatie die vaak wordt afgeschilderd als een (betreurenswaardige) terugtrekking uit het politieke leven. Er wordt ook gemeld dat een vrij groot aantal jongeren in verschillende landen niet lid is van een politieke partij.

Namibië vormt op deze trend (en de bijbehorende gevolgtrekkingen) geen uitzondering. De stijging van het aantal mobiele telefoonabonnementen in dit land wordt echter gezien als een mogelijke gamechanger: dit 'speeltje' zou wel eens de aanzet kunnen geven tot het prikkelen van de belangstelling van jongeren voor politieke deelname en maatschappelijke betrokkenheid. Dat is de hoofdgedachte achter deze studie.

De meeste Afrikaanse staten hebben het Afrikaanse Jongerenhandvest ondertekend. Een van de belangrijkste doelstellingen van deze raamovereenkomst is juist om jongeren tegen het jaar 2020 meer bij de politiek en burgerlijke, collectieve communautaire en niet-politieke activiteiten te betrekken. Deze nadruk is ingegeven door het zorgwekkende karakter van de afnemende belangstelling van jongeren voor deze activiteiten en het feit dat zij zich steeds vaker van de politiek afwenden. Tegelijkertijd zijn er negatieve berichten verschenen over de toenaderingswijze van lokale en regionale leiders en politici in Afrika ten zuiden van de Sahara, in het bijzonder Namibië. Het wordt hen verweten dat zij zich niet inzetten om hun onderdanen te betrekken bij politieke activiteiten en maatschappelijke discussies en projecten. Burgers hebben zich erover beklaagd dat hun regeringsvertegenwoordigers zichzelf niet beschikbaar stellen en dat zij er nooit zijn om naar hun behoeften en verlangens te luisteren, d.w.z. de behoeften en verlangens van leden van gemeenschappen die onder de bevoegdheid van deze politici vallen. Dergelijke gevoelens en klachten overheersen in weerwil van de inspanningen van de overheid om in alle kiesdistricten van het land regionale raadhuizen te bouwen en om zowel de algemene bevolking als politieke leiders te voorzien van mobiele telefoons, beltegoeden en internetverbindingen, en de leiders verder privéauto's ter beschikking stellen zodat zij hun achterban kunnen bezoeken, ongeacht de geografische locatie van de dorpen.

Het is nog niet bekend of jongeren en politieke leiders daadwerkelijk gebruik maken van deze en andere door de overheid ter beschikking gestelde voorzieningen om met elkaar van gedachten te wisselen en de inclusieve democratie te versterken. Dat verklaart de inspiratie voor en het leidmotief van deze studie: ik wilde inzicht krijgen in hoe de leden

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van het Regionale Jongerenforum in Ohangwena hun mobiele telefoons gebruiken en in hoeverre dit gebruik een politieke achtergrond heeft. Gebruiken zij hun mobiele telefoons om zich in te laten met de regionale en lokale politiek? Ik zocht antwoorden op de volgende onderzoeksvragen:

OV1   Welke jongeren nemen deel en wat beweegt hen om zich met hun mobiele telefoons in te laten met de lokale politiek?

OV2   Waarom laten jongeren zich met hun mobiele telefoons in met de politiek?

OV3   In hoeverre staan jongeren met hun mobiele telefoons in verbinding met de overheid en andere stakeholders?

Ik heb een etnografische kwalitatieve onderzoeksmethode toegepast om te onderzoeken hoe jongeren en politieke leiders (die aan mijn studie hebben deelgenomen) denken over het gebruik van de mobiele telefoon als middel om deel te nemen aan en betrokken te zijn bij de regionale en lokale politiek, en wat hun ervaringen daarmee zijn. De gegevens zijn als volgt verzameld: participerende observaties tijdens jongerenforums, 65 semigestructureerde interviews met zorgvuldig gekozen deelnemers (45 mannen en 20 vrouwen) afkomstig uit regionale jongerenforums en plaatselijke voorlichtingsbijeenkomsten, 6 semigestructureerde interviews met regionale raadsleden (regionale politici), een inhoudelijke analyse van 7 Facebookpagina's en 2 WhatsApp groepen, en 2 focusgroepbijeenkomsten met de uitvoerende leden van het regionale jongerenforum in de regio Ohangwena.

Uit de studie is naar voren gekomen dat slechte netwerkverbindingen en radiofrequenties in een aantal van de kiesdistricten, de hoge jeugdwerkloosheid in de regio, de onvriendelijke bejegening op de kiesdistrictkantoren en de (bijna) onmogelijkheid om de politieke vertegenwoordigers in de regio te benaderen of spreken de belangrijkste redenen waren dat de jongeren in mijn studie hun mobiele telefoons gebruikten om zaken te bespreken (bv. politieke en maatschappelijke kwesties) die een grote impact hadden op hun leven. Een groot voorwerp van zorg dat deze studie aan het licht heeft gebracht, is dat, hoewel de meeste politieke leiders hun mobiele telefoonnummers aan het publiek hebben bekendgemaakt en burgers hebben aangemoedigd om contact met ze op te nemen, zij meestal onbereikbaar waren en hun mobiele telefoons steevast door onvriendelijke assistenten werden opgenomen. Jongeren vonden het dus nog steeds moeilijk, zo niet onmogelijk, om deze politici rechtstreeks te spreken. Verder vonden zij dat de meeste raadsleden geneigd waren om zichzelf alleen in verkiezings- en campagnetijd beschikbaar te stellen. Daarmee gaven zij onmiskenbaar de verkeerde boodschap af.

Mijn bevindingen onderstrepen verder dat jongeren over het algemeen online platforms verkiezen boven manifestaties van politieke deelname en betrokkenheid in de echte, stoffelijke wereld – ontmoetingsplaatsen die op dit moment door hun politieke vertegenwoordigers worden benut. De meeste jongeren die (al dan niet online) aan politieke netwerken deelnemen, zoals jongerenforums, zijn voortijdige schoolverlaters, jongeren die

recentelijk een universitaire studie hebben afgerond en aan het begin van hun loopbaan staan en werkloze jongeren uit verschillende kiesdistricten en dorpen. Jongerenforums fungeren als politieke netwerkplatforms waar jongeren werk kunnen vinden, hun politieke voorkeur kunnen bepalen, dialogen kunnen voeren en zichzelf kunnen opladen en oppeppen. Een en ander toont aan dat de politiek voor jongeren een ingewikkelde zaak is. Naast zaken die duidelijk als 'politiek' zijn aan te merken, draait het ook om maatschappelijke en sociaal-politieke kwesties, zoals positieverzwakking, tienerzwangerschappen, hiv/aids, alcohol- en drugsmisbruik, en activering. In dit verband, althans in mijn studie, heeft de mobiele telefoon zich ontpopt als het belangrijkste medium waarmee ze met vrienden, leeftijdsgenoten en familieleden kunnen delen, bellen en sms'en.

De onderzoeksresultaten geven aan dat, hoewel nog steeds populair, de publieke omroep vanwege de op mobiele telefoons te ontvangen politieke nieuwsberichten en programma's inmiddels door particuliere en lokale omroepen is ingehaald. Voor jongeren van het platteland en zonder werk zijn de grootste obstakels voor het gebruik van mobiele telefoons om radioprogramma's te ontvangen toegang, beschikbaarheid, signalen en radiofrequenties. Ondanks deze obstakels hebben mobiele media zich ontpopt als het geprefereerde (virtuele) platform van jongeren voor online politieke activiteiten– niet alleen voor wat betreft de radio, maar in het algemeen. Jongeren zijn minder betrokken bij maatschappelijke en politieke activiteiten die offline worden ontplooid, in de echte wereld, omdat zij door hen worden gezien als het exclusieve domein van de oudere generaties. Ze zijn daarentegen veel meer bereid om zich er online mee bezig te houden.

In een poging om inclusieve democratie in de praktijk te brengen, heeft een aantal jongeren en politieke leiders op regionale en lokale gezagsniveaus voor hun respectievelijke kiesdistricten WhatsAppgroepen opgericht en Facebookpagina's aangemaakt. Deze zijn bedoeld als virtuele platforms voor maatschappelijke discussies en politieke berichtgeving, naast de radio, sms-berichten en openbare of lokale bijeenkomsten. Het betrekkelijk lage kennis- en ervaringsniveau op het gebied van digitale en sociale media onder leden van de lokale gemeenschap staat het doelmatig gebruik van deze platforms door zowel leiders als leden van de lokale gemeenschap echter in de weg.

Tegelijkertijd hebben openbare vraag- en antwoordsessies zich ontpopt – naast mobiele sociale media platforms, zoals Facebook en WhatsApp – als de meest gangbare platforms voor engagement, die het voor burgers van alle leeftijden mogelijk maken om met politici van gedachten te wisselen. Jongerendeelname aan zulke bijeenkomsten is echter nog steeds bedroevend laag. Om dit te stimuleren, om meer jongeren aan te trekken, zijn politici en de weinige jongeren die gewoonlijk op deze evenementen komen opdagen, begonnen met het integreren van amusement (in de vorm van gezang, theater en muziek) in hun politieke contactprogramma's. Het is ze aldus gelukt om meer jongeren over te halen om naar openbare vraag- en antwoordsessies te komen. Die poging is dus geslaagd. Een van de aanbevelingen van deze studie is dan ook om amusement op te nemen in activiteiten

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op het gebied van politiek engagement, teneinde de participerende democratie en digitale inclusiviteit te versterken.

Mijn respondenten gaven onomstotelijk aan dat ondanks de obstakels, zoals de slechte netwerkdekking in hun deel van het land, de hoge jeugdwerkloosheid en het ontbreken van de nodige infrastructuur in de landelijke gebieden, alle jongeren, zowel uit de stad als van het platteland, ervan overtuigd zijn dat de mobiele sociale media een virtuele openbare ruimte tot stand hebben gebracht waar zij met elkaar in gesprek kunnen gaan, strategieën kunnen uitstippelen en elkaar advies kunnen geven over zaken die hun rechtstreeks en ten diepste aangaan, en dat het bestaan van deze ruimte hun belangstelling voor en deelname aan het politieke leven veelal prikkelt en stimuleert, zowel op regionaal als lokaal niveau.

Tot slot, mijn bevindingen laten zien dat jongeren en politieke leiders de sociale media gebruiken om zich te bekwamen op digitaal gebied, om zich te ontspannen en vermaken en om hun betrokkenheid te tonen (soms vallen deze doelstellingen en activiteiten samen), om van gedachten te wisselen met een emotioneel betrokken publiek, en om idealen, overtuigingen en modellen uit te dragen, waaronder politieke idealen, overtuigingen en modellen die verband houden met de directe en indirecte digitale democratie. Het kan geen kwaad om hier nog eens te herhalen dat dit allemaal gebeurt in weerwil van de problemen met netwerkverbindingen en de wijdverbreide jeugdwerkloosheid.

Op grond van de in dit proefschrift gepresenteerde en geanalyseerde gegevens kom ik tot de conclusie dat (het gebruik van) mobiele telefoons en, daarmee samenhangend, sociale media platforms, zoals Facebook, de mogelijkheid met zich meebrengen om jongeren meer bij de politiek en maatschappelijke activiteiten te betrekken, aangezien ze een nieuwe openbare ruimte tot stand brengen voor een inclusieve digitale democratie. Er is echter één voorbehoud: in een gedigitaliseerde samenleving kan het ongecontroleerd gebruik van sociale media praktijken met zich meebrengen die op hun beurt tot een exclusieve democratie leiden. Wij moeten ons best doen om dit te voorkomen en om onze morele waarden, ons gezond verstand en onze eigenwaarde voor een inclusieve democratie in te zetten.

Ter afsluiting dient vermeld te worden dat mijn studie de discussie over oude versus nieuwe media opnieuw aanzwengelt, door te opperen dat nieuwe vormen die in de onderbelichte context van landelijk Namibië opkomen ons inzicht in het karakter van hybride media kunnen vergroten en onze veronderstellingen over de participerende democratie op de proef kunnen stellen.

Curriculum Vitae

Sadrag Panduleni Shihomeka was born on 1 November 1979 at Eembaxu Village in the Ohangwena Region, Namibia. He holds the following qualifications: a Master of Business Administration (MBA) (HRD and Technology Management) (S.A); Bachelor of Education (BEd) (Economics, Business Management and Educational Technologies) (UNAM); ICDL (SA). Sadrag attended primary school at Eembaxu Combined School in Ohangwena between 1986 and 1997. He completed Grade 12 at Haimbili Haufiku Senior Secondary School in 1999.

Sadrag has more than sixteen years of experience in teaching and consulting, in both the private and public sectors. He has worked for the Ministry of Education; has been a teacher and subject head of computer studies; has lectured and facilitated consultancy workshops in the area of research methodology, project management, and undergraduate research supervision at the Namibia University of Science and Technology; has taught and facilitated ICT courses with the office of the prime minister in Namibia, has instructed the curriculum development team for the Namibian police force, and has taught and facilitated ICT courses for Namibian post office (NAMPOST) employees. He is currently a lecturer in management studies, educational technologies, IMTE for adult educators, and social change in the Department of Lifelong Learning and Community Education in the Faculty of Education at the University of Namibia and acts as coordinator for the university's ICDL Centre.

Prior to joining the Faculty of Education, Sadrag was a lecturer in the Faculty of Science at the University of Namibia and taught computer science (for undergraduates), information systems development and project management (for postgraduates), and educational technology (for the fourth year module in the BEd programme). Sadrag was also lead lecturer in the Global Understanding Communication Program with the East Carolina University in the US, at the University of Namibia, between March 2008 and December 2010. He is currently the founding coordinator of the University of Namibia International Computer Driving Licence (UNAM-ICDL) and Digital Literacy unit.

In addition, Sadrag serves as part-time lecturer in research methodology in the School of Management Science at the Namibia University of Science and Technology and as part-time lecturer in corporate business ethics, entrepreneurial studies and leadership, and international business and management information systems at the Institute for Open Learning (IOL).

Sadrag also lectures on management information systems to first year students in Master of Business Administration at MANCOSA and Regent Business School (RBS), South Africa. He was tutor and tutor marker for development studies, IGCSE, and for economics and business studies, IGCSE at the following NAMCOL centers: Concordia College; Jan Jonker Afrikaner High School; and the then Yetu Yama Tutorial Center in Windhoek. He is working as NAMCOL part-time senior moderator for development studies IGCSE/NSSCO

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based in Windhoek and as part-time tutor marker for the Commonwealth Youth Program (CYP), offering tutorial assistance in the following modules: Mod 6 Learning Process; Mod 5 Gender & Development, Project Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation; and Module 11 Promoting Enterprise & Economic Development. Currently he also acts as compiler for the NAMCOL Computer Studies IGCSE Examination Booklet and was a part-time lecturer for business practice (LCCI) and business management (ICSA) in Windhoek.

Before his appointment at the University of Namibia, Sadrag was a secondary school teacher and subject head for computer practice and computer studies (Grades 8–12) at Khomas High School in Windhoek. He also taught computer practice (Grade 8–10), business management (Grade 10), and economics IGCSE at the Wennie du Plessis High School in Gobabis, in the Omaheke Region.

His research interests and consulting experiences include integrated media and technology education for adult educator; inclusive politics; politics and social media; research methods; citizen engagement; e-governance; and ICTs for a sustainable development.

Sadrag started his PhD studies in 2014, through a collaboration between the University of Namibia and the School of History, Culture and Media in the Department of Media and Communication at the Erasmus University Rotterdam. The purpose of this collaboration was to create capacity development at the two institutions. Sadrag's doctoral research explores how young citizens use their mobile phones to engage in the regional and local governance politics and decision-making processes and how the mobile phone enhances active political participation and activism and, more generally, civic engagement and efficient public service delivery in Namibia. The dissertation reached a positive conclusion with regard to the good effects of digitalization on political trends among the young.

Portfolio

LECTURE COURSES ATTENDED DURING COMPLETION OF THIS PROJECT

February 2017–March 2017:

How to Survive Your PhD. Course held at the Erasmus Graduate School of Social Sciences and the Humanities, Erasmus University Rotterdam (2.5 ECTs); certificate obtained.

January 2017:

Introduction to Coding with ATLAS.ti. Course held at the Erasmus Graduate School of Social Sciences and the Humanities, Erasmus University Rotterdam (1 ECTs); certificate obtained**.**

October 2016–November 2016:

Advanced Research Methods 1: Qualitative Data Analysis. Course held at the Erasmus Graduate School of Social Sciences and the Humanities, Erasmus University Rotterdam (2.5 ECTs); certificate obtained.

June 2015–July 2015:

Brush Up Your Research Design: Tips and Tricks to Achieve Your Research Aim. Course held at the Erasmus Graduate School of Social Sciences and The Humanities, Erasmus University Rotterdam (2.5 ECTs); certificate obtained.

CONFERENCES AND ACADEMIC MEETINGS ATTENDED DURING COMPLETION OF THIS PROJECT

Shihomeka, S. P., & Arora, P. (2017). Mobile social media and digital literacy in Namibia's regional politics. Paper presented at the ERMeCC Lunch Seminar, 17 January, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Woudenstein Campus, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, the Netherlands.

Shihomeka, S. P. (2017). Engaging citizens: new media and political engagement in Namibia. Paper presented at the RMeS Winterschool & Graduate Symposium 2016–2017, 19–20 January, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, the Netherlands.

Shihomeka, S. P. (2017). Mobile phones and the digital divide: an ethnographic analysis of youth participation in politics in Ohangwena Region, Namibia. Paper presented at the Etmaal 2017 Conference, 26–7 January, Tilburg University, Tilburg, the Netherlands.

Shihomeka, S. P., & Arora, P. (2017). Impact of mobile social media and digital literacy in Namibia's regional politics. Paper presented at the workshop 'Social Media in Africa: Beyond the hashtag', 26–7 April, Centre of African Studies, Edinburgh University, UK.

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Shihomeka, S. P. (2017). Towards a sustainable mobile phone gender-inclusive democracy: exploring civic engagement practices of rural youth in the northern Namibia. Paper presented at the Multi/Interdisciplinary Research Conference, 26–28 July, NIPAM, Windhoek.

Shihomeka, S. P., Amadhila, H. N, & Naukushu, S. N. (2017). Exploring the role and use of Facebook as a digital network platform for teachers during the 2016 Teachers' Industrial Strike in Namibia. Paper presented at the Commonwealth Education Conference, 28–30 August, Safari Hotel and Conference Center, Windhoek.

Amadhila, H. N., & Shihomeka, S. P. (2017). Exploring social media technologies as information systems and services for economic, social and political development in Namibia. Paper presented at the Information Profession in Namibia Conference, 30–31 August, University of Namibia, Main Campus, Windhoek.

Shihomeka, S. P. (2017). Mobile social media as a skills development tool for youth: analysing the ethical practices of youth political activism on Facebook in the Ohangwena region. Paper presented at the Information Profession in Namibia Conference, 30–31 August, University of Namibia, Main Campus, Windhoek.

Shihomeka, S. P. (2017). Exploring the political role and use of Facebook as an alternative public to promote digital inclusive democracy during the sixth SPYL Congress 2017 in Namibia. Paper presented at the joint conference of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences and the Faculty of Economics and Management Science, University of Namibia, 16–18 October, Safari Hotel and Conference, Windhoek, Namibia.

Shihomeka, S. P., & Arora, P. (2018). Mobile social media and digital political inclusion among Namibia's rural youth. Paper presented at the conference of the the International Communication Association, 24–8 May, Prague, Czech Republic.

LIST OF PUBLICATIONS RELATED TO THIS PROJECT

Journal articles

Shihomeka, S. P. (2017). Engaging citizens: youth, mobile phones, political leadership and inclusive democracy in the Ohangwena Region, Namibia. NAWA Journal of Language and Communication (NJLC), 11(1), pp. 4–16.

Shihomeka, S. P., & Arora, P. Old and new media: Traditional mass media access in Namibia. Manuscript submitted for publication.

Shihomeka, S. P., & Arora, P. Online and offline political networks. Manuscript submitted for publication.

Shihomeka, S. P., & Arora, P. Engaging citizens from below and above: new media and political engagement in Namibia. Manuscript submitted for publication.

Newspapers articles

Shihomeka, S. P. (2017, 2 June). Social media: the rise and fall of social and cultural morality (Part 1). New Era, p. 13.

Shihomeka, S. P. (2017, 9 June). Social media: the rise and fall of social and cultural morality (Part 2). New Era, p. 14.

Shihomeka, S. P. (2017, 23 June). Social media: A favorable e-democracy tool for youth engagement. New Era, p. 17.

Shihomeka, S. P. (2017, 14 July). Mobile social media: An affective public for digital democracy. New Era, p.14.

Shihomeka, S. P. (2017, 28 July). Social media: overcoming regressive and authoritarian politics. New Era, p. 14.

Shihomeka, S. P. (2017, 4 August). Facebook romance: a misdirected democracy. New Era, p. 15.

Shihomeka, S. P. (2017, 25 August). Social media: a catalyst for Sodom and Gomorrah. New Era, p. 14.

MEDIA COVERAGE AND TALKS GIVEN DURING THE COMPLETION OF THIS PROJECT

26 February 2018: Live broadcasting coverage of talk on the topic 'Social media: what is it from now?' NBC Tupoyeni program, 19 p.m., NBC Studio, Northern Industrial Area, Windhoek.

26–7 February 2018: Panellist on a panel discussion on the topic 'Contemporary Internet usage: is Facebook the social media? Youth and Internet usage, social media networks', which took place during the ICANN YouthCom Workshop at the United Nations House, Windhoek, 14.30–15.30 p.m.

27 February 2018: Live broadcasting coverage of talk on the topic 'Social media ethics'. NBC National Radio, 11 a.m., NBC Radio studio, Windhoek North.

20 October 2018: Co-presenter (with Dr R. K. Shalyefu at Okahandja) in invited presentation on the topic 'Social media literacy ethics'. The presentation was for the Anglican Church Youth.

06 November 2018: Panellist on the Namibia Internet Governance Forum 2018 at the UN House, Windhoek. Scope and theme of the panel: 'The digital world is dominated by English, while minority languages struggle to be seen and heard. What on- and offline measures are required for indigenous languages to remain relevant? What role can technology play in mitigating the loss of indigenous languages and Afrocentrism? Do social media influence the use of indigenous languages online? If so, how?'

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