Digital citizenship and political accountability in Namibia's 2019 election

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Introduction

In 2012 only 10 per cent of urban Namibians and 1 per cent of rural Namibians had internet access. Over the past decade, the percentage of citizens using the internet has grown substantially, but it remains the case that only half the population use the internet (World Bank 2022; Kemp 2022). During the national election of 2019, citizen's use of the internet in political engagement was a significant factor, with Namibians using social media to criticize unemployment levels, hold corrupt politicians to account and call for people to vote against the ruling SWAPO regime (Nakale 2019). This chapter analyses the emergence of digital citizenship and asks the question of how Namibian citizens used social media to hold politicians accountable during the 2019 election.

According to Mossberger, Tolbert and McNeal (2008: 2), 'Digital citizens are those who use technology frequently, who use technology for political information to fulfil their civic duty, and who use technology at work for economic gain.' The use of mobile and internet technologies is steadily increasing. The number of mobile phone subscriptions in Namibia has exceeded the number of citizens since 2017 (Statista 2021), and the percentage of citizens using the internet increased from 14 per cent to more than 40 per cent between the national elections of 2014 and 2019 (World Bank 2021). As this chapter will illustrate, the use of electronic petitions, electronic government

portals and social media for civic engagement in political life has also grown significantly over the same period.

Although there is a burgeoning literature on digital citizenship and on digital governance, to date this has focused disproportionately on experiences in the Global North. There has been relatively little research on digital citizenship in Africa and none on digital citizenship for political accountability in Namibia. This chapter addresses that gap. The absence of existing literature presents a challenge as there is little data on which to build. This chapter therefore draws on grey literature, including media reports, social media posts and key informant interviews to provide a foundation upon which other scholars can build.

Background: The Namibian political context

Namibia is located in South-West Africa with a 1,572 kilometre coastline extending north from South Africa. It is sparsely populated with just 2.5 million people occupying a territory of 825,418 square kilometres. Namibia emerged from German colonial rule and from racial segregation under the apartheid South African regime to hold its first democratic elections in 1989 (Namibia Statistics Agency 2013; Saunders 2018). The South-West African People's Organization (SWAPO) has won every presidential election since liberation in 1989, resulting in more than three decades of uninterrupted one-party rule (Melber 2020). SWAPO enjoyed between an overwhelming majority (74–80 per cent) in national elections from 1995 until 2014 (Melber 2021).

However, the 2019 national election saw the first ever fall in support for SWAPO, with its percentage of the popular vote falling from 80 per cent to 65 per cent (Nakale 2020). Although still a commanding majority, the elections marked a significant fall in public support, with some analysts noting youth disengagement with establishment politics as explaining declining support (Tjipueja 2019).

Older voters who lived under apartheid remain loyal to SWAPO which delivered independence from external domination. However, for the 'born free' generation (those born after 1989), the high levels of youth unemployment and government corruption are compelling issues. Tjipueja (2019) highlighted that 52 per cent of the votes cast in the 2019 election were cast by people under

the age of thirty-four (up from 44 per cent in 2014) and 30 per cent were 'born free'. This generation of Namibians is also more active on social media, including Facebook, Instagram and Twitter (WeAreSocial 2019).

The number of Namibian citizens with internet connectivity increased from 80,000 in 2000 to one million by the elections of 2019, by which time both citizens and politicians were using a range of digital technologies in political discourse from e-government platforms to social media (O'Dea 2021). In a country where party politics was stagnant for decades and in which the main press and TV channels were either state-owned or state-regulated, social media provided a novel and relatively vibrant platform to participate in discussions of Namibian politics. In the run-up to the 2019 election some Namibians used digital technologies to air their concerns about unemployment, participate in political discourse and call government to account for its record on unemployment and corruption (Shihomeka 2017). Prior to the 2019 election, the youth unemployment rate stood at 46 per cent. The gerontocratic party structure of SWAPO was seen as failing to represent young citizens, and issues of corruption had resulted in a lack of trust in the political system and disengagement from electoral politics (Mathekga 2021; Melber 2021; Nakale 2020).

Literature review

The chapter focuses on the intersection between the study of digital technologies, citizenship and governance, as illustrated in Figure 7.1. The intersection of the three elements is the focus of this chapter: the use of digital technologies to enable participatory digital governance such that citizens' voices are influential in holding politician powerholders to account. This section reviews the existing literature on digital citizenship and digital governance to inform an analysis of online participation and accountability during Namibia's 2019 election.

Digital citizenship is the ability to participate in society using digital tools and using online platforms (Mossberger et al. 2008). Not all citizens have the digital devices, connectivity or literacies needed to achieve digital citizenship, though. Roberts and Hernandez (2019) offer the five 'A's of availability, affordability, awareness, abilities and agency as a framework to analyse this

Figure 7.1 Intersecting areas of research. *Source*: Authors.

uneven digital access among citizens. Digital citizens, according to Mossberger et al. (2008), are 'those who use technology [daily] for political information to fulfil their civic duty, and who use technology at work for economic gain'. Oyedemi (2020) characterizes digital citizens as those who can regularly and flexibly apply technology in social, cultural, economic and political life, and he connects digital citizenship to issues of rights, equality and social justice. Isin and Ruppert (2015: 44) argue that the capacity for making rights claims is central to citizenship and that 'becoming digital citizens' involves citizens making those rights claims using digital tools or over the internet. This chapter includes an analysis of Namibian citizens' access to and use of digital tools to claim the right to accountable, corruption-free government.

The advent of social media led to a great deal of literature on the emancipatory potential of digital technologies for circumventing establishment control of media and government (Shirky 2008; Ekine 2010). In their review of the digital citizenship literature, Hintz, Dencik and Wahl-Jorgensen (2019: 31) note that 'the overarching focus in studies of digital citizenship is on users' action and digital

agency' with the result that 'the concept of digital citizenship has an intrinsic connection with citizen empowerment' (2019: 31). However, particularly since the Cambridge Analytica scandal and the Snowden revelations about state surveillance, scholarship has turned to explore how state and corporate use of digital technology has closed the space of digital citizenship (Hintz et al. 2019; Roberts and Mohamed Ali 2021). Hintz et al. (2019: 40) conclude that 'Digital citizenship is thus constituted, partly, through the enactment of users but also, partly, through data analysis by the state and the private sector'.

Governance refers to the way power is exercised in the management of a country's social and economic resources (World Bank 1991). 'Good governance' and 'participatory democracy' are normative views about how governance should be improved by, among other things, increasing transparency, accountability and extending the inclusion of citizens in governance (UNESCAP 2009). The global consensus that all states should commit to achieving 'more responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at every level' is enshrined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as target 16.7 (United Nations Development Programme 2015).

Digital governance was hailed with the promise that the application of mobile and internet technologies to the objectives of participatory governance would enable more open, transparent and accountable governance. It was argued by multilateral agencies and politicians that through measures such as payroll automation, making budgets transparent online and enabling more interactive policy discussion between citizens and powerholders, corruption could be reduced, decision-making made more participatory and government more responsive (UNCTAD 2020). Sæbø, Rose and Skiftenes Flak (2008: 4) define digital participation as 'the extension and transformation of participation in societal democratic and consultative processes mediated by information and communication technologies (ICT), primarily the Internet'. Practical examples are the use of government websites, discussion forums, blogs, wikis, chat rooms, geographical information systems, decision support systems, voting systems and podcasts (Sæbø, Rose and Molka-Danielsen 2010). The use of social media platforms such as Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook has gained popularity to allow for interactive many-to-many communication, enabling the public to participate in public discourse and officials to garner public opinion on policy issues (United Nations 2020).

Advocates of digital governance point to its benefits, such as when Afghanistan moved to paying police officers directly to their mobile phones, which resulted

in a 30 per cent decrease in salary misappropriation (Leber 2012). 'Civic tech' innovations include the creation of apps that enable citizens to monitor government budgets and project implementation, actively participate in inclusive decision-making and call officials to account. Examples include FixMyStreet, which allows citizens to report and discuss neighbourhood issues with local government, and crowdsourced platforms like Publish What You Pay, which enables citizens to track procurement and project contracts. Broader participatory budgeting and participatory democracy platforms like Decidim allow citizens to participate in governance and 'reprogram democracy' in municipalities, including Yacatan, Helsinki and Barcelona.[1] Some countries (including Ukraine) have established an online asset declaration system for elected politicians to create transparency and combat corruption (Cela 2018). However, research shows that technologies alone are insufficient to deliver the kind of trusting civic relationships necessary to meet wider governance and democratic objectives (McGee et al. 2018). In his review of digital development programmes, Toyama (2015) concluded that technology can amplify existing human capacity and intent but that it can never substitute for their absence. This means that when there is no political will or insufficient capacity, even the most sophisticated technology is unlikely to deliver good governance.

Affordances are a concept from technology design science that can help analyse how particular technologies make new actions possible. Affordances are the particular 'action possibilities' that a specific technology enables or allows (Norman 1988). From this perspective, social media affords digital citizens the new action possibility of self-publishing a text message, blog or video message and transmitting it instantly to a global audience – something previously only possible for media moguls. Citizens can use these new affordances to share videos of cats or to call out government corruption. Politicians can use the affordances of digital technologies to provide real-time transparency online on government finances, or they can use them to conduct mass surveillance (Zuboff 2019). The point here is that the action possibilities of digital technologies are not technologically determined; they are determined by the political choices and agency of politicians and citizens (MacKensie and Wajcman 1985). As Krantzberg (1967) argued, technology itself is neither good nor bad, nor is it ever neutral.

Critiques of digital governance argue that marginalized citizens are excluded from digital governance and that social media disproportionately

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[1] https://decidim.org/

amplifies already relatively privileged voices (Tufekci 2014). Social media has also served as a platform for xenophobic and misogynist voice and amplified political disinformation and anti-democratic forces, as exemplified by the Cambridge Analytica scandal in the 2016 election that brought Donald Trump to power and the mobilization to breach the Capitol building when he lost the 2020 election (Farivar 2021).

Technology access

To address the critique of digital exclusion it can be helpful to incorporate a tool for foregrounding hierarchies of technology access into any assessment. Roberts and Hernandez (2019) have provided a simple model for thinking through barriers–enablers of technology exclusion–inclusion. They argue that the introduction of digital technologies into social processes always excludes someone. The five 'A's – availability, affordability, awareness, abilities and agency – is a simple heuristic device to guide assessment through a five-stage reflection about potential barriers and enablers to technology access. They can be visualized as five concentric circles (see Figure 7.2).

Five 'A's of Technology Access

Availability: to whom is the technology (un)available

Affordability: to whom is the technology (un)affordable

Awareness: who is (un)aware of the technology?

Abilities: who has the digital literacies to use the technology?

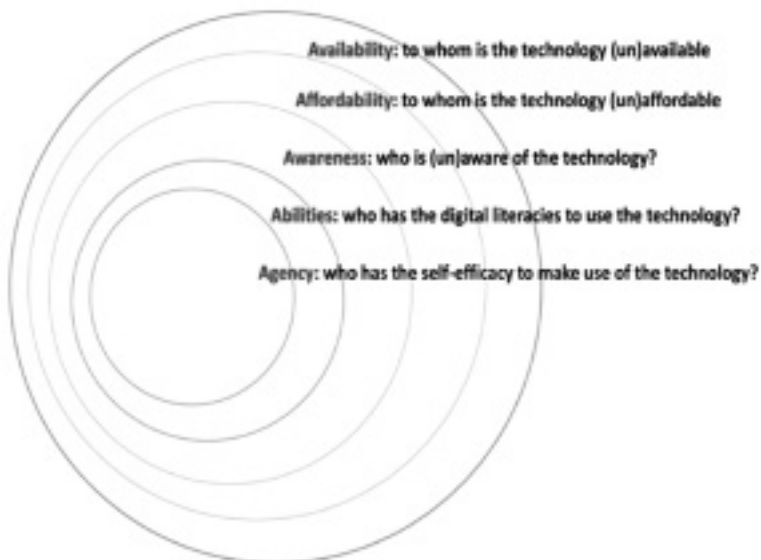Agency: who has the self-efficacy to make use of the technology?

Figure 7.2 The five 'A's of technology access. *Source*: Roberts.

In any population there are some citizens for whom there is no internet *availability* because the cellular or internet connectivity does not reach where they live. In those geographies where there is a signal, there is a smaller group of people who cannot *afford* to have unlimited data. Among those who can afford technology access, there is a smaller group of people who lack *awareness* about its availability or its relevance to their priorities. Where there is availability, affordability and awareness, a lack of *abilities* can be a barrier to use (including digital and language literacies). *Agency* can be a barrier where social norms and values mean that use of a particular technology is discouraged for people of a particular gender, age or status. At the time of the 2019 election in Namibia, only 31 per cent of the population were internet users and 70 per cent of Twitter users were men, so dimensions of access are critical to understanding the potential and limits of digital citizenship.

Citizen Control

Another dimension commonly used to analyse civic engagement is the extent to which a process is initiated and controlled by citizens or the state. Citizen-led or 'bottom-up' processes include organizing petitions and citizen assemblies to aggregate opinion and focus collective action to strengthen claim-making on powerholders (European Parliament 2011; Kneuer 2016; Porwol, Ojo and Breslin 2016). Government-led or top-down processes include consultations and focus groups to solicit opinion and validate policy directions (Kneuer 2016; Porwol, Ojo and Breslin 2016). This distinction enables analysis of the origin and location of power in processes (Kneuer 2016). Assessing initiatives using these tools can provide insights into why some secure uptake and others fail to gain widespread interest from citizens as they can be perceived to be unrepresentative, monopolized by special interests and fail to generate trust among the general public (Sæbø et al. 2010).

The categories of bottom-up and top-down are not mutually exclusive, and well-functioning systems often include both. Porwol et al. (2016) developed an integrated model for participatory digital governance (or 'e-participation'). Their model usefully incorporates both top-down government-led initiatives and bottom-up digital citizenship, as illustrated in Figure 7.3.
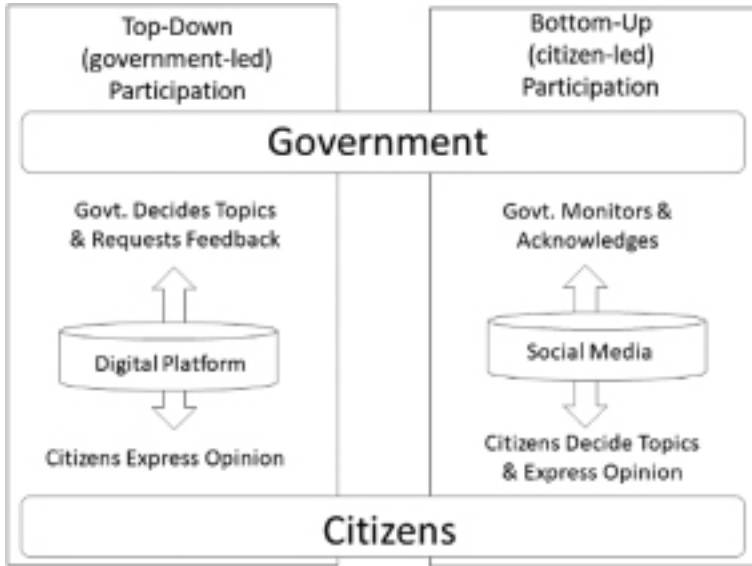
Figure 7.3 Top-down versus bottom-up participation. *Source*: Authors adapted from Porwol et al. 2016.

Elements of accountability

Schmitter (2007: 4) defines political accountability as 'a mutual exchange of responsibilities and potential sanctions between citizens and rulers, made all the more complicated by the fact that in between the two are usually a varied and competitive set of representatives'. Public oversight institutions such as anti-corruption commissions, ombudsmen, complaint offices and human rights commissions manage to influence accountability through what is called 'horizontal accountability' and refer to the relatively equal relationship between the state's institutions of checks and balances (McGee and Gaventa 2011). However, in the Namibian context, these public oversight institutions lack 'clout' and trust from citizens due to political and bureaucratic corruption which is enhanced by the proximity of public oversight officials to political candidates and 'wrongdoers go[ing] unpunished because of political considerations dictated by the ethno-social system of patronage' (Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) 2012: 6).

Vertical accountability refers to the relationship between citizens and their elected representatives in democracies. The 'deepening of democracy' is a school of thought that advocates for extending citizen participation in governance beyond elections, and involves the study of rights-claiming, including demands for political accountability (McGee and Gaventa 2011). A report by McGee et al. (2018) synthesized findings from more than forty research projects focused on using digital technologies to amplify citizen voice and test the working assumptions and expectations about the roles that technologies can play in enhancing government accountability and responsiveness. The report found that not all citizens have access to digital technologies or the agency to use them in political engagement, but for those that do, they can provide new spaces for engagement between the citizen and state. The report also found that transparency and access to information were not sufficient to generate accountability and that the kind of trusting relationships and interactions necessary for accountability were rarely developed online (McGee et al. 2018).

Fox (2007: 663) noted the widespread 'hope that transparency will empower efforts to change the behaviour of powerful institutions by holding them accountable'. However, he questioned the assumption that increased transparency and access to information necessarily enhances accountability, as did other scholars (McGee and Gaventa 2011; Kneuer 2016), concluding that not only is it necessary for collective action to aggregate citizen 'voice' and influence, but they also need mechanisms that provide them with the 'teeth' to secure accountability (Fox 2015).

As a means to assess accountability, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) suggests three constituent elements of accountability: transparency, answerability and enforceability, which it defines as follows (OECD 2014: 33):

- **Transparency:** citizens have access to information about commitments that the state has made and whether it has met them.
- **Answerability:** citizens are able to demand that the state justifies its action.
- **Enforceability:** citizens are able to sanction the state if it fails to meet certain standards.

These three concepts are incorporated into the conceptual framework used in this chapter to assess Namibian citizens' use of digital technologies to secure accountability during the 2019 elections.

Conceptual framework

To incorporate the advantages of each method, in this chapter we use a model for assessing the use of digital that draws on the five 'A's (Roberts and Hernandez 2019), Porwol et al. (2016) and the OECD (2014). The model uses the five 'A's to assess digital inclusion – that is, who has the necessary access and ability to use the digital tools in question. The integrated model for e-participation is used to assess the top-down and bottom-up mechanisms for translating access and agency into digital citizenship, and the tripartite OECD framework of transparency, answerability and enforceability is used to assess the extent to which digital citizenship translates into political accountability. The model is illustrated in Figure 7.4.

Digital citizenship in Namibia

This section presents evidence of growing levels of digital citizenship before the 2019 election. It considers different digital tactics adopted by citizens but begins with some examples of digital governance. These examples of the digital agency of government are presented based on the argument of Hintz et al. (2019) that digital citizenship is constituted by the activities of the state and corporations as well as by the agency of citizens themselves. Governments, digital platforms companies and media houses play a key role in establishing the environment for digital citizenship. Government policy and practice establish a hostile or enabling environment for digital citizenship. Most of the popular social media platforms are run by private corporations, and mainstream media still plays a critical role in what elements of discourse from social media cross over to the dominant political discourse.
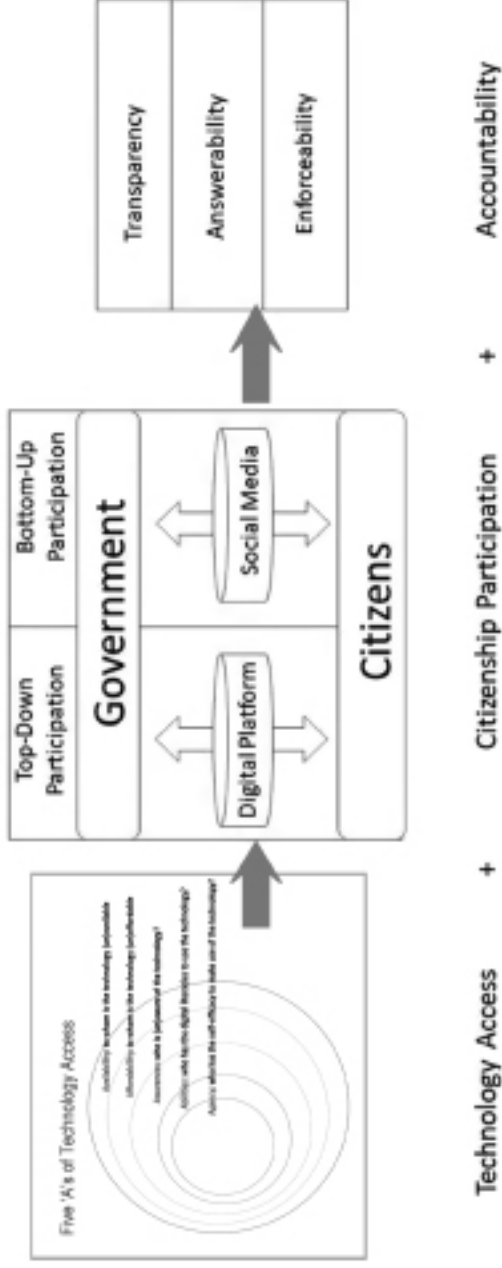
Figure 7.4 DiCaf framework. *Source*: Authors adapted from Roberts and Hernandez 2017; Porwol et al. 2016; OECD 2014.

A number of digital government initiatives have been adopted by Namibian ministries, including the addition of digital government services to run alongside in-person service delivery. The Namibian Ministry of Regional and Local Government, Housing and Rural Development (MRLGHRD) published its first digital governance strategy in 2008 (MRLGHRD 2008). The strategy included the objective of making all government services available electronically by December 2015. The city of Windhoek was one of the first to allow the general public to download government information, access forms and lodge complaints on its website. The Integrated Tax Administration System (ITAS) is an example of a national government service that is now available online, allowing citizens to access their tax account 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, making it easier for digital citizens to access information and process returns from their home or workplace and to receive real-time notifications of their tax status (Namibia Revenue Agency 2021). The government provides some financial incentives for online submission (Schlettwein 2019). The Ministry of Finance publicises ITAS on its Facebook page, where citizens can also comment and complain about services. The United Nations' e-Participation Index is a global ranking of governments' progress in fostering civic engagement and participatory governance through digital technologies. Namibia was ranked 112 of 193 countries in 2020 (UN 2021).

The Namibian National Assembly adopted a social media use policy and communication plan in 2017, in recognition of its growing importance in civic engagement (Ministry of Information and Communication Technology 2016). The policy and plan called for government offices to establish accounts on all of the main social media platforms. A study by Shihomeka (2017) on new media and political engagement in Namibia recorded the expanding political significance of digital engagement but noted that most of the population remained excluded from digital citizenship as they had no internet connectivity. Shihomeka also noted how elected officials' use of social media in Namibia is heightened during election periods and decreases afterwards, and how rural populations are under-represented in online participation *(*Shihomeka 2017). SWAPO's use of social media to influence digital citizenship around the election is considered in the section alongside the campaigns of other actors.

Namibian election 2019

Citizen use of digital technologies expanded significantly prior to the 2019 election. In 2011, only 10 per cent of all Namibians and only 1 per cent of the rural population had access to the internet (NSA 2011), but by the 2019 election, 31 per cent of the population were active internet users, with 630,000 active on Facebook and 46,000 on Twitter (WeAreSocial 2019; Kemp 2019). The main campaign issues were discussed and debated online by digital citizens (Mwenye et al. 2019). This section presents some of the key issues that animated online discussion during the election period, in order to analyse the technologies and tactics employed.

Namibia's 2019 election witnessed a significant amount of digital campaigning designed specifically to increase voter turnout and to influence the outcome. Digital campaigning is understood to mean strategically coordinated collective activities that engage a specific topic to a targeted audience using digital technologies to achieve predefined goals and objectives (Aichholzer and Rose 2020). Digital campaigning can be led by political parties or independent institutions or be citizen-led.

During the 2019 election, the Commonwealth Observer Group noted that citizens made extensive use of social media platforms to participate in political discourse (Mwenye et al. 2019). The main hashtags used to aggregate election content on Twitter were #ElectionYear19, #NamVotes19, #NamibiaVotes19 and #NamibiaVotes2019. The Electoral Commission of Namibia (ECN) ran a non-partisan digital campaign under the hashtag #IWillVote. Their campaign was run on Facebook and Twitter to support voter education and awareness to secure a high turnout on election day (ECN 2019a) and included messages encouraging engagement in the campaign and voter turnout.

The ruling party, SWAPO, ran its online re-election campaign under the banner #WeHaveHeardYou to communicate that it had heard citizens' concerns about unemployment and corruption and that it could be trusted to be responsive to them after the election. Campaign tweets featured marketing photographs of candidates and high-quality designs. The main opposition party, the Popular Democratic Movement (PDM), which eventually polled in second place, aimed to tap into

electoral discontent under the hashtag #ChangeIsComing, encouraging digital citizens to vote for them. The issues that garnered most attention online prior to the election were youth unemployment and government corruption.

Contentious election issues

The next section discusses the topics that dominated online digital citizenship in the election period: declaration of assets by politicians, the Fishrot corruption scandal, youth unemployment and missing election voting machines.

Declaration of assets by parliamentarians

As a means of combating financial corruption, some countries maintain a public register on which they require elected officials to regularly declare their assets (OECD 2011). In 2015, President Geingob declared his assets and urged all members of Parliament to do the same, saying, 'Declaration of assets is an indicator of transparency and accountability, and if you do things legitimately then what do you have to hide? Accountability and transparency help to develop trust' (Weylandt 2016: 3). However, media investigations suggested that members of Parliament were dishonest in their declaration of assets, with many declaring nil or negligible assets (Likela 2020). Journalists assessed these declarations to be untruthful and to 'make a mockery' of transparency and accountability (New Era 2015). The asset registry in Namibia was not made available online, calling into question the government's commitment to transparency. The issue became the subject of significant debate on social media, with some citizens welcoming the declaration of assets by the president and First Lady as an advance for democratic accountability. Other digital citizens echoed the critique of journalists and used social media to call for accountability from other parliamentarians by submitting truthful declarations of assets in accordance with their government's own policy.

Fishrot scandal

Two weeks before the 2019 Namibian election, WikiLeaks published 30,000 emails, contracts, spreadsheets and PowerPoint presentations implicating six senior SWAPO officials in a $10 million corruption scandal involving a valuable fishing concession dubbed the 'Fishrot' scandal (Links 2020; Bonga 2021). The leaked documents alleged collusion between the Fishrot 6 to provide fishing quotas to the Icelandic commercial fishing conglomerate Samherji in exchange for financial kickbacks over a four-year period (Gibson 2020; Kleinfeld 2019). Namibian citizens used social media hashtag #Fishrot campaigns and electronic petitions to call for action. One petition on change.org gathered almost 20,000 signatures (Iyaloo 2019; Wentworth 2019). Mainstream media covered the story extensively and referred to social media comments in their coverage, bringing pressure to bear on the government to make itself accountable (Slinger 2019; Pflughoeft and Schneider 2020). Two government ministers were forced to resign. Digital citizens used social media to call for the public to vote against corruption, reminding them that they had the power to deliver change at the polls.

Ahead of election day, the presidential press secretary held a press conference and tried to diminish the damage caused by the revelations, calling it disinformation designed to influence the election outcome and tarnish the reputation of Namibia (Links 2019). Criminal charges have since been brought against ten people, including former Minister of Justice and the former Minister of Fisheries, who were scheduled to stand trial in the Windhoek High Court in 2022.

Youth unemployment and the electorate

Youth unemployment, which stood at 46 per cent prior to the election (NSA 2018), was a major issue in online debates. The Commonwealth Observer Group, which monitored conditions on the ground ahead of polling, reported that there was a significant level of voter apathy among young voters due to high unemployment (Mwenye et al. 2019). Despite this reported apathy, the majority of those voting (52 per cent) on election day were aged eighteen to thirty-two years. Almost a third (30 per cent) were 'born frees' aged twenty-

nine or under (Tjipueja 2019). Digital citizens articulated their growing discontent about the lack of employment opportunities, levels of homelessness and poor health services, with some using social media to discourage citizens from voting for SWAPO, as a means of protest.

Missing voting machines

Shortly before election day, *The Namibian* newspaper reported that three electronic voting machines were missing after having been lent to the ruling SWAPO party by the Electoral Commission of Namibia in 2017. The newspaper article accused the ECN of concealing relevant information from the public and only being transparent when the story broke (Namibia Fact Check 2019; Smith 2019). The missing voting machines created public mistrust in the Electoral Commission and in the authenticity of election outcomes. Citizens took to social media to air their grievances, highlighting their distrust and demanding an honest account of who the machines were lent to and when. In a video shared on Facebook by *The Namibian*, the Independent Patriots for Change (IPC) candidate Panduleni Itula challenged the use of the voting machines in the elections. An online petition was launched, calling for the removal of the machines; it gained 2,786 signatures (Go Petition 2019).

Discussion

In this section, we analyse the examples of digital citizenship presented earlier, using the five 'A's framework adopted at the outset and illustrated in Figure 7.2 to answer the main research question: How did Namibian citizens use social media to hold politicians accountable during the 2019 election?

Access

Citizenship processes that rely on digital tools always exclude some parts of the population (Roberts and Hernandez 2019). At the time of the election, only a quarter of Namibians had the mobile devices and connectivity necessary to be

digital citizens (WeAreSocial 2019). The five 'A's of technology access are one means of analysing hierarchies of inclusion (Roberts and Hernandez 2019).

Availability

Availability of cellular broadband is a barrier or enabler of digital citizenship. Fourth-generation (4G) mobile data speeds that are needed to engage in the kinds of digital citizenship mentioned earlier, on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, were not available in many rural areas of Namibia in 2019.

Affordability

Affordability of 4G mobile data connectivity excluded some people from digital citizenship and limited the length of time others were able to take part in online debate.

Awareness

Awareness of which discussions were taking place when and on what social media platforms also affected who participated in digital citizenship.

Abilities

Abilities refer to the various literacies (technical, political and language) that exclude or include individuals' participation in particular aspects of digital citizenship.

Agency

It is also clear that social norms (including gendered norms) affect whether people have **agency** to take part in online political discourse. In Namibia, 71 per cent of online participants in 2019 were male (WeAreSocial 2019). This echoes Tufekci's (2014) point that if we rely on social media for digital citizenship, we must be conscious that urban, male, middle-class voices will be over-represented at the expense of rural women, who remain largely silenced.

Citizenship mechanisms

Prior to the 2019 election, the Namibian government was making progress expanding digital government services and using social media to interact with citizens. It had implemented several top-down government digital services such as online information access and a tax account portal. However, there were no interactive digital spaces, nor was there parliamentary asset transparency or any decision-making platforms along the lines of Decidim. Unlike South Africa and Kenya, Namibia has chosen not to become a member of the Open Government Partnership which supports government to increase transparency and accountability by, among other things, making national budget and expenditure records available.[2]

Rhetorically, the Namibian president pledged that his government 'is committed to promote effective governance and to execute its mandate, on the principles of accountability and transparency' (Geingob 2017: 1). In his 2019 New Year's Eve message, the president declared that 2019 would be the 'year of accountability', proclaiming his belief that transparency plus accountability will result in improved levels of trust (NBC 2019). Although the president had been transparent in making his own personal assets public and had urged other members of his government to do the same, the register of assets remains incomplete and has never been shared online, making it practically impossible for most citizens to access the records. More systematic transparency declarations by elected officials and real-time publishing of government finances on the internet are political and technical options that remain available to the Namibian government in the years ahead. The technology exists to make government data open and transparent, but in Namibia, as elsewhere, it is generally more difficult to mobilize the political will for this. And as Toyama (2015) concluded, technology can only amplify existing human capacity and intent.

Citizen-led mechanisms of digital citizenship include using online petitions and social media fora to influence narratives, to make accountability claims on government and to call on other citizens to vote in particular ways. WikiLeaks posted evidence on the internet, journalists posted their stories on Facebook and Twitter, and digital citizens contributed their critique and analysis across all the main social media platforms, causing the Fishrot corruption scandal

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[2]   https://www.opengovpartnership.org/

to trend locally and spread virally through the diaspora. This put significant pressure on the government in the critical two weeks before the election. The government responded using its own social media channels, in an attempt to diffuse the criticism and promise action. This created a vibrant interaction of bottom-up and top-down information exchange that was successful in securing the accountability of politicians, in as much as ministers resigned and are due to appear in the High Court.

The affordances of social media for interactive many-to-many communication provide a channel for digital citizenship that is not entirely framed by political parties and establishment media. It is, however, mediated by commercial platforms whose opaque algorithms manipulate what appears in a digital citizen's social media feed in ways that are secret. So, although social media expands the space of digital citizenship and enhances citizens' agency and freedoms of expression, the affordances of the platform and its algorithms also shape and limit citizen agency in ways that are not transparent. Nevertheless, Namibian digital citizens were able to exercise their democratic right in the run-up to the election to raise issues of public concern on social media, organize electronic petitions and engage in a form of bottom-up digital citizenship not previously enabled by traditional media or political parties.

Online petitions are a hybrid tool for digital citizenship because citizens initiate them bottom-up to make demands, but they are designed to elicit government responsiveness. Once a petition has been submitted, the formal procedures of acknowledging or acting on its demands are organized top-down by government officials (Aichholzer and Rose 2020). Within the case context of the e-petitions submitted in the Fishrot corruption scandal, for example, no government institution provided a response, which raises questions about the government's commitment to accountability. Online petitions are an effective means for digital citizens to aggregate opinion, create a campaign focus, generate a contact list and articulate a collective demand for accountability. However, as Fox (2015) concluded about many social accountability mechanisms, even when they are successful in aggregating 'voice', they often lack the 'teeth' necessary to generate responsive, accountable government.

Digital campaigning can be bottom-up (citizen-led) or top-down (government-led) (Aichholzer and Rose 2020). SWAPO's top-down campaign led with the #WeHaveHeardYou slogan, which was intended to position the party as listening to complaints, suggestions and input from citizens and being responsive. However,

the SWAPO digital campaign was a unidirectional 'communique' rather than interactive 'communication': encouraging party voting without any evidence of having listened and taken tangible action in response to citizens' demands. While SWAPO uses the language of transparency and accountability, concrete evidence of each is difficult to find. The next section continues a systematic analysis using the OECD element of the conceptual framework.

Transparency

Transparency within domestic accountability implies that citizens and institutions have access to information about commitments made by the state (the government and its agencies) and the extent to which these commitments have been honoured (Loquai and Fanetti 2011).

In the Fishrot case, transparency was provided by a whistle-blower who provided WikiLeaks with files exposing corruption between the Icelandic company where he worked and the Namibian government. After WikiLeaks released the files over the internet, they were made available to local journalists in Namibia who covered the story, spurring citizen comment, calling for the president to sack the accused and make good on his policy of 'zero tolerance for corruption'. When local newspaper *The Informante* (2019) added the news that SWAPO had accepted resignations from ministers Shangala and Esau and withdrawn the two from the National Assembly, the post received 954 likes and 338 comments, some demanding they be brought to court. It is impossible to precisely measure the influence of digital citizenship in this sequence of events, but it is reasonable to say that it was not insignificant. As Aichholzer and Rose (2020) note, government accountability is often elicited when there is a cross-fertilization between transparency and increased citizen engagement in making demands on government.

Answerability

Answerability within domestic accountability implies that government, its agencies and public officials are obligated to provide information to justify

their actions and decisions to the public and supervising institutions (Loquai and Fanetti 2011).

The digital citizenship campaign around the missing electronic voting machines is a case in point. The disappearance of the machines was not explained, nor were they recovered. Citizens' demands for responsiveness went unheeded. The Electoral Commission's 'tight-lipped' response to the missing voting machines fell short of optimal transparency. The issue only came to light due to investigative journalism bringing to the public's attention a matter that the ECN had been aware of for some months. This suggests that horizontal accountability was not functioning and that the relevant public oversight institutions lack distance from the executive or 'clout'. In this case, the vertical accountability demands from citizens and independent media did not elicit answerability. The ECN did feel it necessary to provide some justification to manage public perception in the form of a guarded press release, but only after the issue was brought to light by the media. However, it did not answer any of the central questions about where the machines went, why and who was responsible. The government did provide some information, but this did not amount to a justification of their actions. It fell short of genuine answerability; nobody was ever held accountable.

The case in which digital citizens *were* able to elicit answerability was the #Fishrot scandal. Responding to social media demands for the sacking of ministers implicated in the scandal, the government was forced to publicly answer the demands. A press statement was published on the Namibian Presidency (2019) Twitter page, which stated that the president accepted the resignation of the 'Fishrot' accused – the then Justice Minister Sacky Shanghala and then Fisheries Minister Bernhardt Esau (Immanuel 2019; Namibian Presidency 2019). The statement said that the presidency 'has taken practical steps to promote effective governance, prioritising the fight against corruption, promoting greater transparency and accountability' (NAMPA 2019: 2). Controversially, the presidency thanked the accused ministers 'for their patriotism and contribution to the work of Government', which drew much criticism from the general public. Some felt this fell well short of 'zero tolerance for corruption' and sounded more like what McGee and Gaventa (2011) have called patronage and accommodation of corruption.

There is no evidence that online petitions resulted in answerability. The petitions were not acknowledged, responded to or mentioned elsewhere.

Enforceability

Enforceability within domestic accountability 'refers to the willingness and power of citizens or the institutions that are responsible for accountability to sanction the offending party or remedy the contravening behaviour' (Loquai and Fanetti 2011: 6).

Even the president of Namibia seems to lack either the willingness or power to enforce sanctions on parliamentarians who refuse to make transparent their assets. The Electoral Commission of Namibia lacks either the willingness or the power to enforce transparency or accountability for the stolen electronic voting machines. Although national elections offer a mechanism for enforcing a change of government, many Namibians have become disaffected by party politics, but digital citizenship affords an opportunity to make claims and demand accountability.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to understand how digital citizenship contributed to political accountability prior to the 2019 national election in Namibia. The most contentious episodes of online debate were analysed through a conceptual framework of technology access, citizenship mechanisms and elements of accountability.

The study documents increased digital citizenship in the 2019 election, the use of online petitions and social media engagement in politics (primarily on Facebook and Twitter). Political parties and government agencies ran their own online campaigns, while WikiLeaks and local journalists provided some transparency on issues not revealed by existing agencies or oversight mechanisms. This transparency enabled digital citizens to run hashtag campaigns to amplify contentious issues and demand accountability. This was made possible by increasing levels of internet access, but the majority of the population remain excluded from digital citizenship.

The analysis found that while digital citizenship is increasingly important in Namibian political accountability, it is early days; only one-third of the population can engage as digital citizens, and they are not demographically representative of the whole population. The analysis found that although

the Namibian government is extending digital services, it is not yet doing so in a way that contributes to its stated objectives of accountability and zero tolerance for corruption. Increased digital citizenship has been used to call for accountability from government, especially around youth unemployment and government corruption. Despite rhetorical support for transparency and accountability, the government has chosen not to make government data open or to put the assets declarations of parliamentarians online. On the eve of the election, the ruling party provided answerability in the face of the Fishrot revelations by announcing the resignation of top SWAPO officials. In other cases, government officials have remained tight-lipped, and answerability has not been forthcoming.

Although the affordances of social media technologies have amplified digital citizens' claims-making in online spaces, they have had only limited success in translating increased 'voice' into 'teeth'. Accountability requires mechanisms that have the power of enforceability. This can be provided by well-functioning horizontal accountability mechanisms providing transparency, answerability and enforceability. Alternatively, it can come in the form of vertical accountability when voters enforce a change of government.

Digital citizenship is destined to play a greater role in Namibia's national elections in 2023 and 2027. The 'born frees' are an ever-expanding segment of Namibia's population. This generation is under-represented in Parliament, worst affected by unemployment and are early adopters and heaviest users of digital technologies. The number of young people forming their political consciousness online and using social media to enact their digital citizenship is growing. Youth unemployment is rising, and the Fishrot court case is scheduled to play out in court before the 2023 election. The outcomes of Namibia's next elections will not be determined by digital technologies, but they will be used to amplify the agency and claims-making of digital citizens as well as the government.

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