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Bring back the signal: an evaluation of the existence of a digital public sphere in the South African mediascape.

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Abstract

On the 12th of February 2015, in an unprecedented move, members of the media in South Africa (SA) protested in Parliament and chanted "bring back the signal", waving their smartphones in the air after discovering that a signal jamming device had been activated to disrupt cell phone signals in the National Assembly. Their protest denied President Jacob Zuma the opportunity to deliver his State of the Nation Address (SONA) until the signal and connection to the internet had been restored. It was the first time in the History of democratic SA the SONA was disrupted. The presence as well as the rapid spread and use of new media technologies in the SA mediascape has led scholars like Yu-Shan Wu to question the nature of their use and impact on government policy decisions. This study contributes to such work as well as long standing debates about the role of new media technologies in advancing democratic ideals in emerging democracies and the internet's role as a public sphere. It does this by using a case study research method focusing on SONA 2015 to evaluate whether the South African digital space constitutes a digital public sphere. This paper concludes that indeed the South African digital space does constitute a form of digital public sphere. This sphere is largely operated and structured by news media organisations that use their websites, social media and various online platforms to engender it.

Key Words

New media, internet, democracy, public sphere, deliberation, digital public sphere SONA 2015.